



Two Options to Consider in Agriculture

A formal meeting of the Trade Negotiations Committee (TNC) devoted entirely to agriculture was held on October 10 with the aim of agreeing a way forward that would unblock the agricultural negotiations, whose impasse poses a threat for food security and livelihoods of Members. The objective is to find a credible negotiating path that would lead to concrete results during the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) which is to be held in Cameroon.

There was a convergence of views on the significant changes taking place in the agricultural trade landscape, justifying the adoption of new and effective rules. Members agree on the need to strengthen the agricultural sector to enable it to effectively address contemporary challenges, including food insecurity, climate change and environmental concerns, as well as economic and social development.

Members agree that now is the time to do things differently to rebuild trust and achieve results. For this, injecting new ideas into the negotiating process is essential to craft cutting-edge rules that would support global agricultural trade in the near future.

Some Members support the idea of setting milestones on the road to MC14. This strategy would involve periodic meetings at the Heads of Delegation level, with Senior Officials where necessary, to help ensure progress on the most intractable issues holding back progress.

The Chair of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoASS, i.e., the agriculture negotiation group), Ambassador Acarsoy, presented two options to engage in substantive and interactive discussions in the coming months and prepare the ground for concrete outcomes at MC14.

1. The first option is to encourage small group discussions on specific issues whose results would later feed into the broader debate within the CoASS. This is already happening with the ongoing discussions between the Cairns Group and the African Group on PSH and domestic support.
2. The second option involves the appointment of neutral facilitators for the various negotiating issues, such as PSH, SSM; domestic support; market access; export competition; export restrictions; and cotton. These facilitators will periodically report to the CoASS on progress made. This option could “constitute an efficient way to trigger innovative approaches and rebuild trust” Dr Ngozi said. It is also the approach used in the dispute settlement reform, where “six co-conveners [are] assisting with the technical work with experts. And it's going reasonably well,” she added.

Most Members (including Canada) prefer option 2, although Canada could settle for option 1 or option 2 or pursue both processes simultaneously. However, some like the US and the EU requested further clarification on option 2.

The EU is concerned that the facilitator-led approach could bring Members back to their usual positions and pull them farther apart, while the US emphasized that if Members were to adopt a facilitator-led approach, then they needed to first know what they were asking facilitators to get into and how they would be selected. India voiced its concern with respect to option 2, saying that it would undermine existing mandates on PSH for instance which should be addressed as a priority. Others like Russia said it is opposed to any negotiations on export restrictions.

In response to Members' intervention, Dr Ngozi said she noted that no one had rejected the two options presented. That being said, she sensed an “appetite” to see both options move forward, although a number of delegations had questions about the process and wanted clarification on several points. She will discuss that with the concerned Members along with the Chairs of the General Council and the agriculture negotiating group.

Director-General Appointment Process

Ambassador Petter Ølberg, Chair of the General Council, has informed Members that he has “detected convergence to initiate the appointment process for the next Director-General earlier than anticipated.”

The appointment process is therefore scheduled to begin on October 8, 2024, and will be conducted in accordance with the “Procedures for the Appointment of Directors-General” (the Guidelines), which stipulates that Members will be given a month from the commencement of the appointment process to submit nominations for candidates. All nominations must be received by November 8, 2024 (i.e., three days after the 2024 United States presidential election).

The candidates will then have three months, until February 8, 2025, to engage with Members and present their qualifications.

Dr Ngozi took office on March 1, 2021. Her term of office will expire on August 31, 2025. At the July General Council meeting, the African Group requested that Dr Ngozi be reappointed for a second term as soon as possible to avoid the appointment process competing with the preparation of MC14 in Cameroon. At the time, the United States remained silent on the African Group initiative.

The Trump administration opposed her candidacy, preferring her opponent, Trade Minister for the Republic of Korea, Yoo Myung-Hee. Dr Ngozi had to wait for President Biden to win the 2020 election to be confirmed as WTO Director-General.

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