



AN OVERVIEW OF THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS ON AGRICULTURE

WTO Members Reflect on Next Steps After MC13

At the March 21-22 General Council (GC), the first since the 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) held in Abu Dhabi (UAE), WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala told Members they needed “four Rs – Reflect (and I mean reflect briefly), quickly Regroup, Reinvigorate, and Return to work – focusing on the positives, to complete the unfinished business soon.”

Among the key areas mentioned in the outstanding work category are texts on fisheries subsidies (Fish 2/second wave, i.e. subsidies contributing to overcapacity and overfishing) on which Members have “an even better idea” of what they want to see and on agriculture on which they came “close to charting a course for reforming” the rulebook, the DG said. “Now we need to establish the best process to conclude these negotiations as soon as possible,” she added.

Members must learn the right lessons from MC13 and immediately start working on the robust technical preparation needed to complete the work in Geneva ahead of Ministerial Conferences. The Director-General recalled that the WTO GC – the organization's highest decision-making body in Geneva – has the power to close issues on behalf of Ministers.

Retreat on Ministerial Conferences’ process

Dr Ngozi told delegates that adopting “a lose-lose negotiating posture” at MC13 was not conducive to achieving results.

“I want to underscore to Members who think that blocking negotiations on all files because they did not get what they wanted [given] that present global circumstances are extremely challenging for this organization, and so are not conducive to this lose-lose approach, making the organization look like it’s gridlocked and this has not served it well in the past and serves it even less well now,” she said.

Although she did not name a specific country, most trade observers pointed the finger at India, whose Commerce and Industry Minister, Piyush Goyal, withdrew from an apparent consensus on fisheries subsidies and agriculture.

Many agreed with the DG’s criticism. Singapore suggested that Members hold a retreat to review how Ministerial Conferences are approached with the aim of improving their effectiveness and maximize their outcomes. Several delegations, including the United States, supported the idea. Some called on countries to step up their efforts and show leadership instead of irresponsibly abusing the consensus system. The results of the retreat could be implemented at MC14, Singapore suggested.

Dr Ngozi also mentioned that some countries regret the absence of cross-cutting processes in small groups such as “Room D” or “Green Room” type meetings. “Some of the feedback I’ve now gotten after seems to indicate that some of you would have liked Green Rooms,” she said.

IFD into Annex 4 – to be dealt with at the GC level

The MC13 was successful in advancing plurilateral processes. According to Dr Ngozi, “while the multilateral instrument remains the gold standard at the WTO,” Members “should also be open to additional instruments to deliver outcomes for our people as we did on Services Domestic Regulation and the Investment Facilitation [for Development] Agreement (IFD).”

Chile, on behalf of the 125 Members involved in the IFD plurilateral process, presented a proposal which aims to formally incorporate the agreement into Annex 4 of the WTO Agreement. Chile suggests that the GC decide that “The Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement as annexed to this Decision shall, upon its entry into force in accordance with paragraph 1 of its Article 45, be added to Annex 4 of the WTO Agreement, after the Agreement on Government Procurement.”

Only three delegations expressed reservations about the inclusion of IFD in the WTO rulebook: India, South Africa and Türkiye. It was decided to include a dedicated process within the GC to discuss the integration of the IFD into the WTO rulebook.

Agriculture to pick up where Members left off in Abu Dhabi

The Chair of the agriculture negotiating group, Ambassador Alparslan Acarsoy, said he was also disappointed by the lack of an outcome on agriculture at MC13, but remained positive thanks to the numerous proposals on the table and Members' success in generating a text which serves as a basis for discussion.

Ambassador Acarsoy urged Members to reflect on the causes of the continuing impasse. "We'd have to find the most efficient way to resume the negotiations without falling again in the same traps," Ambassador Acarsoy stressed, reminding Members that they do not have much time before the next Ministerial Conference, given the nature of the issues that must be resolved.

The Chair said he intends to convene a meeting of the negotiating group (COASS) in April to discuss next steps.

Brazil, meanwhile, took the floor to suggest a way forward in agriculture. "Without a solution to the agriculture quagmire, all sectors of this organization will continue to suffer, due to the disproportionate relevance of the agricultural sector for the wealth of nations, their food security and the livelihood of their populations," Brazil said.

It suggests resuming the negotiations from where Members left off in Abu Dhabi and reframing the discussions by focusing on text-based negotiations.

"The few weeks of work at COASS with a Chair's text added more value in identifying areas of convergence than the past several years of non-text based unfruitful discussions which preceded them."

Brazil said that in Geneva and Abu Dhabi it had worked with Members (Australia, Canada, China, EU, India, South Africa and the United States) to "streamline the Chair's text" for a decision at MC13. Alongside China and the United States, the trio took "a step forward" in this work as the Conference progressed and moved further toward "a workable solution."

"We cannot afford to let such progress wither away, and restart discussions from zero," Brazil told the full membership, adding that "[t]here are Members who see the possibility of holding plurilateral negotiations in agriculture. There are promising prospects there, but Brazil is not ready to relinquish multilateral negotiations."

Brazil suggests resuming work within the COASS based on a clear plan and timetable. Following these discussions, Brazil "will subsequently table a clean and streamlined version of the COASS Chair's text for the consideration of Members."

"We aim for an agreement on the basis of such text at the July General Council in order to start work at the COASS based on a clear process and timeline. The COASS will then strive to agree on comprehensive agriculture modalities by MC14," Brazil stressed.

Brazil also suggests exploring ways to promote new dialogues on agriculture within the General Council. It suggests establishing a forum to discuss sustainable agricultural production, productivity and trade, with the aim of advancing the agriculture negotiations.

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