

BTOR on FES/WTO Asia Regional Dialogue Singapore

Background

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) jointly organised Asia Regional Dialogue on “WTO at Cross-Roads? - Experiences and Expectations around the Doha Agenda” in Singapore on 30-31 October 2006. The objective of the conference was to discuss relevant issues of the Doha Round and the WTO system with different stakeholders from various regions of the world. The purpose of the meeting was to facilitate discussions and obtain participants’ perspectives on what could be done for the successful outcome of Doha Round. WTO plans to organise such meetings in different regions to engage CSOs in dialogue with WTO.

Participants:

Approximately 40 participants from around the globe were present at the meeting. Following speakers addressed sessions of the meeting:

- Bernard Kuiten, External Relations Divisions, WTO Secretariat, Switzerland
- Hans-Peter Werner Development Division, WTO Secretariat, Switzerland
- K Kesavapany, Director, ISEAS-Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore
- Goh Chien Yen, Third World Network, Switzerland
- Mark Thirlwell, Director of International Economy Program, Lowy Institute, Australia
- Chap Sotharith, Cambodian Institute of Cooperation and Peace-CICP
- Said El Hachimi, External Relations Division, WTO Secretariat; Switzerland
- Esther Busser, ICFTU-Geneva, Switzerland
- Gigi Francisco, International Gender and Trade Network Asia, Philippines
- Aileen Kwa, Focus on the Global South, Switzerland
- Pham Lan Huong, International Integration Policies Department, Central Institute for Economic Management, Vietnam
- Bonnie Setiawan, Institute for Global Justice, Indonesia
- Minar Pimple, UN Millennium Campaign, Asia Office, Thailand
- Sundaram Pushpanathan, Bureau for Economic Integration and Finance, ASEAN Secretariat, Indonesia
- Ganesh Wingnaraja, Asian Development Bank, Philippines
- Rahul Sen, ISEAS, Singapore
- Charles Santiago, MSN Diversified, Malaysia
- Joachim H. Ihrcke, Vice President of the European Chamber of Commerce, Singapore

Highlights:

- This meeting was unique initiative as this was for the first time, after the suspension of Doha Talks in July 2006, that WTO organised such a dialogue having regional participants.
- The meeting was very interactive. Almost all participants interacted during the meeting, giving their views on various trade and development issues in their country.

- The meeting was very focused and did not divert from the topic.
- Though there were many speakers in each session but each speaker gave a short and focused presentation leaving sufficient time for floor discussions.
- Large number of participants appreciated CUTS publications, especially the recent briefing papers on ‘Suspension of Doha Talks’.
- Ganesh Wignaraja of ADB informed about an important document written by him, J. Francois, M. Mc Queent titled “EU-Developing Country Free Trade Agreements: An Overview”. This could be useful for our current EU-India FTA project as well as for our upcoming projects.

Lowlights:

- There were no speakers from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Given the current situation and India’s important role in WTO trade talks there should have been one speaker from India.
- In one of the session neither mikes nor LCD projector was working. Such a mishappening in a high profiled meeting like this was unexpected.

Lessons Learned:

- It was observed that currently, majority of WTO Members are opting FTAs and RTAs and with this current situation of mushrooming of RTAs and FTAs what comes out of Doha round is that a small deal is better than no deal. In order to bring down negative effects of FTA, Asian Development Bank (ADB) is suggesting to have certain requirements pertaining to rule of origin and to have a particular template for all countries to enter into agreements. It should be looked that how CSOs can influence drafting of these templates. It was also suggested to look on social issues for the FTAs and RTAs.
- The idea of the development box had been originated from CSOs. Regarding role of CSOs in Multilateral Trade negotiations it was suggested that the relationship between WTO and CSOs should be institutionalised. This is important because if NGOs start working with Government then they will become biased. It was also questioned by WTO people that these days CSOs have started working directly with Government so will the situation change? It was also asked that what is the possibility of CSOs having direct participation in negotiation for which nobody had answer.
- Earlier WTO Public Forum had diversified views i.e. each CSO having different viewpoint of WTO negotiations and that was the main beauty but now it is more mainstreaming.
- Pham Lan Hoong of Vietnam mentioned that Vietnam will be 150th Member country of WTO by the end of this month.
- It was also emphasised by all participants of developing countries that domestic policy needs to be restructured for poverty reduction.

- Till now there has been no rule to check inconsistency within RTAs and provision for the member countries to approach DSB in such a situation.
- Rahul Sen of ISEAS, Singapore mentioned that US-Singapore Agreement is much more than what WTO agreement could have achieved. EU-Singapore are large trading partners but there is no FTA between them and now they intend to go for FTA as US-Singapore FTA is creating a problem for EU to trade with Singapore.
- Labour standards should be given more weightage. While trade violation may result into annulling of any deal, no strong action is taken against violation of labour rules.

Miscellaneous

- It was observed that if talks are not revived, the system of reform will gradually reach a deadlock.
- MDG 8 emphasise on three main issues aid, debt and trade. However time line guidelines given are vague for MDG8. There are certain limitations of MDG which are as follows:
 - They are not enforceable
 - There is minimum commitment towards these goals
 - It gives aggregates which hide reality
- A proper analysis of FTA with regard to its spill over effects on various sectors of economy of countries entering FTAs must be carried out. While some sectors gain from a particular FTA, some loose. Government in such cases should design a package of relief to compensate losers from the benefits accruing to the gainers.
- FTAs in the developing countries are politically influenced. One such case is US-Thailand FTA, controlled and dominated by US While US dictates the terms to suit its own interests, Thailand merely serves as an investment avenue to US.