

Making plurilateral negotiations support WTO

WTO-Geneva, 30th September 2021, Session #52, Room W, 11.30-12.30 hrs.

Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development- CSEND, Geneva

Organizer: Prof. Raymond Saner, University of Basel and Director of CSEND

The session focused on this year's PF sub-theme "Strengthening the Multilateral Trading System". The panelists assessed how plurilateral agreements and plurilateral initiatives could be fully multilateralized.

The event built on a related panel which was organized by CSEND in 2012. Since then, world trade has evolved towards more complexity exacerbated by the impasse of the Doha Round and the growing diversity of global trade resulting in a push by many leading member countries to create solutions outside the WTO system as for instance through FTAs and RTAs.

The organizer put the following questions to the panelists- 1.To what extent is it possible to "multilateralize" plurilateralism today?, 2. What are the different "options" to negotiate plurilateral agreements (with or without MFN?); 3. Besides Services, Environmental Goods, Investment, could other trade areas be negotiated through plurilateral approaches? If so, which areas? and 4. What are the strategies available to developing and least developed countries in the negotiation of plurilateral agreements?

The panelists were:

- Mr Stuart Harbinson, former Trade Representative of Hong Kong to WTPO, then senior WTO official, Chief of Staff to DG Supachai and later Special Adviser to DG Pascal Lamy
- Mr. Hamid Mamdou, ret. Former Head of the Services and Investment Division at WTO, now with King & Spalding, Geneva
- Professor Peter Draper, Executive Director: Institute for International Trade, University of Adelaide, previously with SAIIA, South Africa
- Mr. Pradeep S Mehta, Member of the CII's International Trade Policy Council. Secretary General, CUTS, Jaipur, India

The panelists made very pertinent statements, for instance **Stuart Harbinson** suggested that there must be a strong case for reviewing the conditions under which plurilateral agreements can be added to Annex 4 and allowing more flexibility in the types of agreements that can be added to Annex 4. **Hamid Mamdou** emphasized that the conversation on plurilaterals is political in the first order and is about the future of the negotiation function of the WTO and it is up to the member countries to clarify existing WTO rules and that WTO rules can be changed by members but members political vision is needed. **Peter Draper** made reference to the fact that plurilateral agreements have primarily been negotiated by OECD economies while LDCs, Africa, South Asia are notably absent yet Lower income economies primarily interested in Investment Facilitation for Development yet not in related services domestic regulation, health

and medical, or MSMEs. **Pradeep Mehta** (off-line due to connection problems) suggests to be cautious that the expansion of plurilaterals does not become a path to a complete destruction of the consensus principle at the WTO. Plurilaterals can complement and support a functioning multilateral system, but they cannot be a tool to fix larger systemic problems.

Panelists' publications, speaking notes and copies of the respective presentations are available at <http://www.diplomacydialogue.org/publications/trade-diplomacy.html>