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MISSION REPORT

following the ad hoc delegation of the Steering Group of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO to the WTO Public Forum, Geneva, Switzerland, 10-12 September 2024

Committee on International Trade

Members of the mission:

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Introduction

The mission was centred around the participation of Members to the 2024 edition of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Public Forum, entitled ‘Re-globalization: Better Trade for a Better World’. Contrary to normal practice, no Steering Committee of the PCWTO (co-organised by the EP and the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU)) and EP panel at the WTO Public Forum could be organised as the Public Forum took place so close to the EP elections and authorisation to travel was obtained only late.

The WTO Public Forum gathers each year around 2000 representatives from civil society, academia, business, the media, governments, parliamentarians and inter-governmental organizations to discuss the latest developments in world trade and propose ways of enhancing the multilateral trading system. 2024 was the highest attendance yet of any Public Forum given the increasing impact and importance of trade issues.

In the margins of the WTO Public Forum, Members also held fruitful bilateral meetings with Ambassador João Machado, Permanent Representative of the EU to the WTO (i.e. the EU Ambassador to the WTO), WTO Director General Dr Okonjo Iweala and WTO Deputy Director Generals Jean Marie Paugam and Angela Ellard. The Members also met the WTO facilitator on Fisheries Subsidies (Ambassador Gunnarsson), e-commerce (Ambassadors Tan Hung Seng and Hikota) and dispute settlement (Ambassador Dwarka-Canabady). Finally, the Members also met with Zuko Godlimpi, Deputy Minister of Trade, Industry and Competition of South Africa and the US Deputy Ambassador to the WTO (David Bisbee).

Summary account of meetings

The WTO Public Forum took place at a difficult time for the WTO. Free trade and the multilateral trading system are under threat of geopolitical tension and US-China rivalry. The July 2024 meeting of the WTO General Council was not able to overcome the hurdles blocking agreement at the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13), which took place in February 2024. The main issues on that agenda were the second fisheries agreement, agricultural reform, an agreement on investment facilitation for development, e-commerce and the (re-)appointment of a (new) WTO Director-General.

The theme of the Public Forum was ‘Re-globalization: Better Trade for a Better World’, exploring ways how re-globalization can help make trade more inclusive and ensure that its benefits reach more people. The idea of the Public Forum was that trade has been good for development and by making trade more inclusive, even better results can be achieved. Many speakers criticized the introduction of tariffs, because the tariffs are wrongly perceived as a way to protect domestic industries from foreign competition, but in fact raise domestic prices and harm consumers.

As usual, INTA Members started with an exchange with the EU Ambassador to the WTO, João Aguiar Machado, on the current state of play of WTO negotiations after MC13.

In a bilateral meeting with WTO DG Okonjo Iweala, she underlined the importance of the parliamentary dimension in the WTO, stressed her gratitude for the active role of the EP for multilateralism and expressed her willingness to come to INTA again. She stressed the important role parliamentary diplomacy can play in promoting the ratification of the

Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, which needs 28 more ratifications to enter into force.

In terms of dynamics and support, the EU is well respected in the WTO, perceived as the main fighter for the multilateral order alongside a few key allies such as Japan and South Korea.

At the same time, there were criticisms by some against some of the EU's autonomous environmental measures with a perception that there was insufficient international consultation in particular with regard to the Deforestation Regulation and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Members were informed of ongoing research by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and UN Trade and Development on addressing the issue by making carbon pricing comparable.

Several counterparts stressed that consensus decision making with 166 members in a polarised world is seriously hindering the effectiveness of the WTO. Efforts to reach plurilateral agreements with a more limited group are often blocked by countries that insist on sticking to consensus decision making. An important message at the Public Forum was that middle powers can play a big role in WTO and that it is important to move forward, keeping the door open for them to join agreements.

Reform and the future of the WTO two-tier independent dispute settlement system were an important theme during various meetings. Members were informed that negotiations have picked up after the formalisation of the reflection process and the appointment of a new facilitator. Progress is being made on accessibility to the dispute settlement system for developing countries, but more fundamental reform is unlikely before the end of the year.

In terms of substantive discussions, Members met key interlocutors on the agreements on fisheries subsidies. After concluding the agreement on tackling the worst forms of fisheries subsidies in 2022, the work is now ongoing to conclude the Agreement on Subsidies for Overcapacity and Overfishing. In response to requests for support, Members stressed they want to use their network of parliamentary contacts to get parliaments all over the world to support these first multilateral agreements on sustainability.

Members also welcomed the progress seen in the negotiations of the joint statement initiative on e-commerce. The facilitators for these negotiations explained that a great number of WTO members agreed to stabilise the text and now work towards inclusion of the agreement in the WTO Rulebook. In other meetings, Members explained that that inclusion could not happen quickly as other agreements are pursued with a higher priority. The Investment Facilitation Agreement that would give the advantages of the agreement to all WTO members seems to get first priority. Moreover, the inclusion would need to happen by consensus, something not easy to reach in the WTO currently.

Conclusions

The participation of INTA Members to the WTO Public Forum was a welcome opportunity for them to engage with the leadership of the WTO, representatives of civil society and stakeholders, while at the same time making the case for a stronger involvement of parliamentarians in the decision-making and management of trade policy.

It allowed for open and frank discussions with important counterparts and to get a better insight in the challenges to the WTO on the road to the Steering Committee of the WTO, jointly organised by the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2025, and the WTO Fourteenth Ministerial Conference (MC14) that will be held in Cameroon in 2026.

Annex: Final programme

WTO PUBLIC FORUM
10-12 September 2024, Geneva

DRAFT PROGRAMME OF EP DELEGATION

Tuesday, 10 September 2024

11.15- 12.00	INTA meeting with Mr. João Aguiar Machado, EU Ambassador to the WTO
12.00-14.15	Possibility to participate in the WTO Public Forum Working panels, with EU speakers in panel 17 and 21
14.30-15.00	INTA meeting with Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the WTO
16.30-18.00	Possibility to participate in the WTO Public Forum High-level panel on Re-globalization: Trade in a Geopoliticized World

Wednesday, 11 September 2024

09.00-12.00	Possibility to participate in the WTO Public Forum panels
12.00-12.45	INTA meeting with H.E. Mr. Einar GUNNARSSON, Permanent Representative of Iceland to the WTO and Facilitator of Fisheries Agreement
14.15-15.00	INTA meeting with Ambassador Usha Dwarka-Canabady, Permanent Representative of Mauritius and Facilitator on Dispute Settlement Reform Process
16.00-16.45	INTA meeting with Mr. Naoki HIKOTA, Ambassador of Japan and co-convenor of the e-commerce negotiations
17.15 -18.00	Possibility to participate in the WTO Public Forum panels

Thursday, 12 September 2024

09.30-10.15	INTA meeting with Mr David Bisbee, Assistant United States Trade Representative and Deputy Chief of the US Mission, Geneva
10.30-11.15	INTA meeting with Jean Marie Paugam, Deputy Director General of WTO
12.00-12.45	INTA meeting with Zuko Godlimpi, Deputy Minister of Trade, Industry and Competition of South Africa

15.00-15.45	INTA meeting with Ambassador Tan Hung Seng, Permanent Representative of Singapore to the WTO and co-convenor of the e-commerce negotiations
16.00 - 18.00	Possibility to participate in the WTO Public Forum Working panels