
2016 ANNUAL SESSION OF THE
PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

What future for the WTO?

Geneva, 13-14 June 2016

Organized jointly by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the European Parliament

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Geneva, 13 June 2016

Members of Parliament,
Ambassadors,
Delegates,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to welcome you to the eleventh Parliamentary Conference on the WTO on behalf of the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz.

As this conference is a joint effort by the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, allow me to express a special word of gratitude to our partner, the IPU, as well as to the World Trade Organization for allowing this event to take place here today.

It is very inspiring to see so many parliamentarians from all corners of the world, which shows the importance of the parliamentary dimension in WTO affairs. It also shows the great interest Parliamentarians have in trade policy in general. As elected representatives, we act as a vital link between citizens and decision makers on the one hand, conveying the views of our electorates to those charged with negotiating deals, and on the other hand by holding our governments to account and ensuring our concerns are heard and taken into account.

Public opinion is increasingly focusing on trade agreements, given how they have evolved in recent years and how issues such as regulatory standards, food safety and sustainable development concerns are now part and parcel of them. The public, with good reason, wants to know more about what is being decided and by whom and that extends to decisions taken in the WTO.

As the Chairman of the Committee on International Trade in the European Parliament, I clearly feel this in my everyday work. It is my firm belief that trade negotiations need to be more transparent and more accessible to the citizens than has been the case in the past. Since taking up my function in 2014 I have consistently pushed for this. I am pleased to say that we see a lot of progress. As regards the bilateral negotiations the European Union is involved in, there is today a much improved access to documents and information on the ongoing negotiations, where much of this can even be found online. Members of the European Parliament are today, after hard negotiations, also able to consult confidential documents. I think this is important for the democratic process in relation to trade and I hope it can serve as a source of inspiration also for others.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here to discuss the future of the WTO. A lot of our time at this conference will be dedicated to discuss the post-Nairobi agenda. I had the pleasure to lead a delegation of 10 Members to the Ministerial Conference in Nairobi. These were intense and interesting days, and we were relieved that in the end it was possible to reach an agreement on many issues that are of great importance, not the least for developing countries. But I will not hide that our initial expectations were much higher and that it was a disappointment that we could not advance more at the Ministerial Conference. I think it is also evident that the process leading up to the final decision was far from optimal, even more so if you believe that transparency and inclusiveness should be leading words for trade negotiations. The WTO will have to revise the process and working methods to avoid this in the future.

Since Nairobi, WTO Members have been engaged in an intensive debate on what the future agenda should include. It is my hope that we Parliamentarians will contribute to this discussion in a constructive way during these days, giving further guidance to our governments on the way forward. Time has come to start taking decisions on what the priorities should be for the next steps, and even more so if we want to avoid the same situation at the next Ministerial Conference as ahead of the Nairobi conference.

As Parliamentarians, we also need to make sure that the decisions that were taken are implemented. The Trade Facilitation Agreement still needs around 20 countries to ratify it before it enters into force. WTO Members need to live up to commitments as regards the LDC services waiver or improved Rules of Origin.

Last week, the European Parliament approved the expansion of the Information Technology Agreement, one of the most significant outcomes in Nairobi. We hope therefore to be able to live up to the commitments of applying the first tariff cuts by 1 July this year. Trade in the 201 products added to the list - such as GPS systems, touch screens, medical devices- amounts to 1.3 billion euros and will certainly contribute to the development and expansion of the IT-sector, also to the benefit of consumers. When speaking with business they point to the enormous benefits of a multilateral agreement, the main advantage being that they don't need to comply with any specific rules of origin. Global trade has changed, with global value chains it is more complex to define where a product has really been produced. This is an argument in favour of a multilateral approach that can certainly be used more often!

Over the next two days we will hear from key negotiators and we will deliberate on a range of issues and how they relate to trade. For the first time, we will for example discuss a gender perspective on trade.

I wish you all a successful session and I hope that the conference will further contribute to mutual understanding, and to send a clear message to all the ambassadors and governments on the future of the WTO. Finally, I hope it will contribute to greater involvement of parliamentarians and the general public in trade policy. I thank you for your attention.