

Declaration of African civil society on the road to 6th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation in Hong Kong

From the 16-19 of August, 2005, organisations of civil society from across Africa, comprising trade unions, farmers organisations, women's organisations, faith-based organisations and non-governmental organisations, met in Accra under the umbrella of the Africa Trade Network to deliberate upon the challenges posed to African countries in the on-going negotiations at the WTO, particularly in the preparations for the December Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong. We adopted the following conclusions and demands.

We affirm as primary our right to pursue autonomously determined policies for the development of our economies, and to fulfil the social and human rights and livelihood needs of our people. Over the past two decades, this right has been severely undermined by external agencies like the World Bank and IMF. The policies of economic liberalisation and deregulation imposed by these agencies has led to serious economic collapse and social and environmental stress. An attempt is being made to continue this process in even more severe forms in the WTO.

It is four years since the launch of the WTO much-touted Doha "development" agenda. In that period there has been no progress in tackling the developmental concerns of African and other developing countries which were proclaimed as pivotal to the success of the Doha agenda. The powerful members of the WTO have frustrated all attempts at redressing the fundamental imbalances of the WTO regime which have contributed to wreak havoc upon African and other developing country economies and their people. Instead they have persisted with their attempts to impose the needs of their own economies and corporate interests on the rest of the world.

Two years after the resistance of developing country governments to this situation, culminated in the dramatic collapse of the 5th Ministerial Conference in Cancun, the arrogance and double-standards of the powerful still remains the characteristic pattern of the WTO negotiations. As is evident from their proposals, the rich and powerful industrialised countries of the WTO continue to pressurise African and other developing countries to undertake further and deeper liberalisation commitments in their industrial, agricultural and services sectors, and lock them permanently into the system. At the same time, the developed countries remain intent on maintaining their advantages and protection.

As the Hong-Kong Ministerial approaches, these countries are set to come under even more intense pressures, and will be subject even more intensely to the manipulative, untransparent and undemocratic methods always employed by the developed countries to get their way.

We reject these attempts to undermine the policy autonomy of our countries, and cause further calamity to our economic development, and the fulfilment of our social rights. In furtherance of this, we state the following.

Non Agricultural Market Access (NAMA)

Africa's industries have been devastated by two decades of World Bank/IMF imposed policies of trade liberalisation. Negotiations in NAMA will make this worse if the developed countries succeed in imposing drastic reductions in tariffs, as well as the restrictions of the levels to which African and other developing countries can in future raise tariffs. This will remove tariff policy as an important tool of industrial development, at a time when many other policy tools have already been removed under the agreements in the WTO.

We therefore demand that African countries should not accept and they must not be pressured into accepting the proposals on tariff being promoted by the advanced industrial countries.

Instead they must be allowed to determine the definition and employment of tariff instruments and related policies.

Agriculture

Agriculture is central to the food security, rural development and livelihood needs in African countries. In the on-going negotiations African and other developing countries face the danger of being forced to open their markets to agricultural exports from the developed countries while the latter continue to protect theirs. Worse, the African and other developing countries will be exposed to the unfair subsidies of the developed countries, with artificially cheapened products being dumped in their markets, their own farmers displaced, and their livelihoods disrupted.

We demand that African countries must not undertake any further reduction in their tariffs for agricultural products; and they must also not bind their tariffs at current levels. In addition, they must have the right to use measures to further strengthen their ability to protect their domestic producers as they judge necessary, including the special safeguard mechanism and the right to designate special products.. At the same time, the developed countries must eliminate all their subsidies which enable them to dump artificially cheap products in our markets and in global markets, and devastate our economies.

Services

Services are crucial for our economic development. In addition, services, especially essential services like health, education, water, are fundamental rights, the access to which must be guaranteed to all. IMF and World Banks imposed policies of liberalisation and deregulation have already transformed some of these essential services into operations for profit, and taken them out of the reach of the vast majority of the citizens in African countries. At the same time, deregulation and liberalisation have placed services in the hands of private mainly foreign, providers, and have made them subject to externally driven economic considerations, thereby undermining their role in the development of an integrated domestic economy.

The developed countries seek to further entrench this process by pressurising African and other developing countries to open up more services sectors, and commit these under the General Agreement on Trade in Services.

We call on our governments not to accede to the request of the developed countries for further liberalisation; and furthermore, not be coerced into committing their existing liberalisation undertaken under IMF/World Bank pressure, as this will entrench them in the WTO and make them irreversible.

S&D, and Implementation Issues

The proposals by African and other developing countries to strengthen their right to special and differential treatment within WTO rules, as well as to resolve the problems of implementation with the existing agreements have been effectively marginalised. These issues are on the verge of disappearing from the Doha work programme. We demand the re-instatement of these essential development issues to the fore-front of the WTO negotiations.

EPA negotiations, and WTO compatibility

The developed countries, particularly the US and EU, have resorted to bilateral and regional trade agreements with other developing countries to attain the objectives that they have not been able to attain in the WTO. In the context of the EPA negotiations, the European Union is attempting to impose the so-called Singapore issues on African countries, and to get these

countries to grant market access to European goods and services far beyond the WTO requirements, and undermine Africa's economies and their efforts at regional integration.

We endorse the position of the Africa Ministers of Trade in Cairo in relations to the EPA negotiations. In the context of the WTO negotiations, we support the demand for the amendment of Article XXIV of the GATT to remove the reciprocity requirements in trade agreements between developed and developing countries members, including between African countries and the EU.

Process

African countries are further disadvantaged in the on-going negotiations by the untransparent and undemocratic methods and processes being used, such as mini-ministerial meetings and meetings of small-groups of countries, from which African countries are excluded. These methods and processes have intensified and will continue to intensify as the developed countries attempt to resolve controversial issues in their favour ahead of Hong Kong. We call on African governments to reject the outcomes of any meetings in which they have not participated. We demand that the processes of the WTO must be made democratic, transparent, inclusive and accountable.

Furthermore, in view of the persistent attempts by the major powers to divide African and other developing countries and undermine their unity, we urge our governments to strengthen their unity in the spirit of Cancun, and build upon their existing alliances.

Above all, we call on our governments to ensure that their national positions and mandates for the Hong Kong ministerial are elaborated through national debates and discussions with the participation of people's organisations, as well as national parliaments

We call on all civil society and people's organisation to be firm in their demands on our governments to protect and promote the interests of all people at all times and at all costs.