

Are developed countries serious about a deal at the WTO?

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First, the anti-concentration clause followed by seeking binding commitments from developing countries on sectorals in industrial goods and now the demand for re-induction of 'peace clause' in agriculture. One may seriously doubt whether the developed countries are serious for a deal on modalities in the Doha Round of negotiations by the WTO (World Trade Organisation) this week, or ever. At best, it may be a ploy of the developed countries to put developing countries on the defensive and in a reactive mode as always. All these demands are a gross disrespect of the core mandate of the Doha Round and against the very spirit of the Doha Development Agenda. Often many people wonder – development for whom? In intent Doha Round of trade negotiations is for development of the underdeveloped but in practice developed countries seems to be promoting their own mercantilist trade agenda *a la* the Uruguay Round.

Ever since the launch of the Doha Round in 2001, developed countries have always tried to divide the developing world that constitute the majority of the WTO membership. Immediately after the launch, on the issue of special & differential treatment, the US raised the issue of 'graduation' and 'differentiation', the obvious intention was to divide the developing country members who are not as homogeneous a group as the developed countries in the WTO. In case of TRIPS & Public Health too, the US tried to create a wedge between Sub-Saharan African countries, the beneficiary importing countries and the supplying countries that could provide generic medicines under compulsory license and parallel import. The US did not even spare the LDCs (least developed countries) group. For that, Asian LDCs, particularly Bangladesh, have always been a target because of their competitive ready-made-garments sector.

In the ongoing crucial talks at Geneva, the developed countries are once again raking up issues intended to create friction among the developing countries. In NAMA (non agricultural market access) they have been pressurising large developing countries like India, Brazil and China to open up their industrial goods market. This demand is in exchange for dismantling their protection in agriculture sector. But now the developed countries are singing a different tune. According to them if advanced developing countries undertake large cut in industrial goods tariff it will promote South-South trade and help poor developing countries. Again the attempt is to put large developing countries against the poor and smaller ones, particularly LDCs.

Developed countries must know that India and Brazil, supposedly their main target, have always delivered on their commitments and promises. For instance in granting duty-free and quota-free market access both Brazil and India have announced their decision to grant unilateral preferential market access to LDCs. This is in spite of the fact that their mandate from the Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration of 2005 is clearly in the nature of best endeavour. Contrary to this the US scheme of preferential market access to LDCs still excludes Asian LDCs.

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Promoting South-South trade is important, but let us not mix it up with issues which are being negotiated currently in Geneva. Developing countries are serious in their endeavour to exploit their huge untapped potential and are making a huge effort to boost South-South trade. To give an example, trade between India and Africa has increased six-fold in six years. If developed countries are really serious to successfully conclude the Doha Round they should honestly stick to the mandate as agreed in Doha in 2001 and subsequently revised in July 2004 in Geneva and December 2005 in Hong Kong. Otherwise a Cancun-type collapse could take place as already warned by the Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim.

Ripples of the confusion caused by the developed countries through raising obstructive issues have reached the format and process of negotiations being undertaken in Geneva. Pascal Lamy, the Director-General of the WTO has suspended the green room process, postponed the Signaling Conference on Services by a day and asked delegations to meet in small groups and reach closer to a common position before negotiations through a larger participation could begin. We are at the cusp of a make-or-break moment.

Let success not slip by just because developed countries continue to believe that developing countries can be hoodwinked into an unfair deal like in the Uruguay Round. All the fireside chats, the walks in the woods, and similarly quaint descriptions given to formats of negotiations in the run up to this week cannot ignore a basic purpose: completion of a development round of trade negotiations. It is time to negotiate like serious partners looking for achievement of the mandates in the Doha Declaration, the chief amongst which is the development dimensions of its outcome.