

Regional Consultation Seminar on
South Asian Positions in the WTO Doha Round
[*South Asian Forum for International Trade, Phase III*]

Organized by
Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka & CUTS-CITEE, Jaipur
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Backgrounder

Background

CUTS Centre for International Trade, Environment and Economics (CUTS-CITEE) initiated a project entitled *South Asian Forum for International Trade (SAFIT)*, which had the twin objectives of (i) promoting incisiveness in trade policy making in five select South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and (ii) providing inputs to arrive at possible common South Asian negotiating positions in regard to the Doha Development Round. Pursuance of the second objective of this project was inspired by the emergence of several coalitions of developing countries in the ongoing Doha Round of trade negotiations, leading to empowerment of the economically and politically weaker members of the WTO in an unprecedented manner. It was felt that such a cooperative arrangement amongst the South Asian countries would boost the audibility of the region's common demands at the WTO.

The first two phases of SAFIT explored the possibilities of common ground for the aforementioned programme countries, and came up with a host of important findings and policy recommendations through which the region as a whole could benefit from the Doha Round by creating jobs and improving living standards. It was noted that the case of South Asia is typical and different from most of the other regions of the world, given the region's diversity. Even while wide gaps exist between larger economies like India and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) including Bangladesh in terms of their trade policy targets and bargaining power amongst the WTO membership, there are a number of common priorities for the region in the main negotiating areas of agriculture, NAMA and services as well as with respect to trade facilitation measures, S&DT provisions etc.

The SAFIT project led to a better understanding amongst the programme countries about each others priorities and paved the way for informal joint consultations and discussions between the delegations of these countries in Geneva since 2004. Further, in order to keep the spirit of cooperation alive, CUTS has been holding a series of regularly organized meetings, involving delegates of South Asian Missions to the WTO, through its Geneva Resource Centre.

However, as the protracted Doha Round advanced slowly over the years, ground realities facing the programme countries might have undergone changes, necessitating a re-examination of the outputs of SAFIT. Against this context, CUTS CITEE has launched a third phase of the project (SAFIT III). Research has been undertaken in the third phase to determine how ground realities relevant for the negotiating interests of South Asian countries in the WTO have changed and the results thereof have been used to review the common South Asian negotiating position arrived at in SAFIT I and II. This includes a stock taking of the main interests of South Asian countries in Doha Round as reflected in the research outputs of the previous phases, an assessment of positions of South Asian countries *vis-a-vis* those major interests and an analysis of compatibility between interests,

positions and changes in ground realities. This exercise has helped to clarify whether traditional stance of the programme countries needs to be changed and if yes, what are the ways forward for South Asian region in this respect.

The Regional Consultation Seminar

The regional consultation seminar to be organized under SAFIT III has the following key objectives:

- To disseminate the findings of SAFIT III and thereby compliment the trade policy making process in each of the five South Asian countries.
- To facilitate discussions between trade policy professionals and practitioners from the programme countries and thereby consolidate the efforts of census building among the programme countries.

This seminar will be organized in collaboration with the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka, a leading social science research institute and think-tank as well as one of the regional partners of the SAFIT project since its inception. The seminar will help not only to form a clear picture of the current preferences of South Asian Countries but also provide suggestions and recommendations on stands that need to be taken in support of these preferences and subsequent course of action. The consultation seminar will serve as a facilitative platform so that these stands can be suitably projected at negotiating tables by the mentioned negotiators. The seminar will be attended by various stakeholders including trade negotiators and policy makers, along with representatives of civil society organisations, academia, research institutes etc. from the five programme countries.