

The Challenges of Effective Participation in the WTO: The Case of a Least Developed Country

WTO Presence

Sierra Leone has no permanent diplomatic mission in Geneva. Its nearest consular mission is in Brussels, with responsibility for both European Union (EU) and WTO issues. The Embassy is small with only three professional staff, including the Ambassador. The Ministry of Trade in Sierra Leone has started slowly to develop some capacity on WTO issues. It has established a Policy, Planning and Research Division (PPRD), which is staffed by a Senior Trade Policy Adviser on assignment from the Commonwealth Secretariat and one Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Fellow, on assignment for two years.

Despite the lack of trade capacity, Sierra Leone has done its best to participate in every WTO Ministerial Conference since Singapore in 1996. Its negotiation strategy has usually been to join the consensus within various groupings including the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP), LDC and African Group. Usually, Sierra Leone's delegation is restricted to two or three, including the Minister of Trade.

For Hong Kong, things will be slightly different. Sierra Leone's delegation will comprise of six or seven people including the Minister. It will include more than one person with the appropriate technical skills to participate in the negotiation groups at the Ministerial Conference, thanks to the support from some development partners.

National Coordination Body on Trade

Since Sierra Leone went through its trade policy review in February 2005, establishing a National Coordinating Committee on Trade (NCCT) that discusses regional and international trade policy issues, develops ideas and strategies on negotiation positions, and makes recommendations to the Minister of Trade, and through it, to the Cabinet. The NCCT comprises of about 25 representatives of various public and private sector organisations with relevance to trade. For many of these representatives, the WTO is an unknown topic. Thus, it has been important to try to raise awareness, and increase understanding of some critical issues at the WTO for Sierra Leone, especially with the advent of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

Despite the establishment of this coordinating body, the practical arrangements for coordination among government ministries and other institutions are challenging. These challenges relate to both logistic and substantive issues. On the logistical side, for a start, regular power supply is problematic, the government machinery is not networked by email communication, and regular attendance from colleagues is not guaranteed due to competing schedules. Moreover, communication links with the mission in Brussels are patchy and inconsistent. These logistical difficulties hamper access to, and sharing of, information, which in turn affect regular analytical work and consistent consultations among key stakeholders on trade policy issues.

Sierra Leone has been a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) since its inception, and before that was a contracting party to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). However, Sierra Leone has not developed sufficient capacity to participate effectively in the WTO and is among those Least Developed Countries (LDCs) that are marginalised in the multilateral trading system.

On the substantive side, members of the NCCT have a general understanding of international and regional trade, but do not have knowledge of specific issues at the WTO. These would help to develop negotiating positions, relate WTO issues to overall national trade policy and economic development, and there has been insufficient time to bring everyone up to speed up on the relevant issues.

On account of these challenges, Sierra Leone's participation in the Doha Round has been less than effective, and thus its preparation for Hong Kong will be restricted to a few key issues where its interests lie.

Heavy Workload

At present, due to the number of regional and international processes that Sierra Leone is involved in, the work load on the PPRD in the Ministry of Trade and potentially that of the NCCT is heavy given the lack of capacity in the country on trade policy issues. Sierra Leone is a member of the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS), and apart from the negotiations on further regional integration under ECOWAS, is involved in the negotiations of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU.

It also seeks to negotiate effectively in the Doha Round, which implies constant participation in numerous meetings in Geneva and elsewhere. Sierra Leone has also just started to participate in the Integrated Framework (IF) for trade related technical assistance for LDCs. This involves preparation of a Diagnostic Trade Integration Study (DTIS), development of institutional arrangements for the coordination of the IF process, and the organisation of a number of consultative meetings including a Validation workshop and a round-table with donors. The National Focal Point for the IF in Sierra Leone, which has overall responsibility for the coordination of the IF process, is the PPRD in the Ministry of Trade.

In addition, Sierra Leone is also a member of the African Union (AU) and is participating in the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The country is also embarking on substantial trade law reforms, with the development of legislation on intellectual property rights (IPRs) and competition policy. In addition, the Ministry of Trade is embarking on an ambitious private sector development programme that would see the establishment of a comprehensive strategy on private sector development. All these programmes and processes put enormous strain on the few technically competent people in the Ministry of Trade.

Limited Human and Technical Capacity

Some attempts have been made to develop human and technical capacity in the Ministry of Trade that would help Sierra Leone engage more effectively in regional and international processes like the Doha Round. For instance, the Ministry's staff have benefited from a number of technical cooperation activities organised by the WTO Training Institute and the Ministry has made requests for national training workshops on a number of WTO issues.

Ironically enough, despite the great need in Sierra Leone, some of these national workshops have not been able to take place because of the local costs implied by the organisation of such events: the WTO does not provide support for national activities.

In addition, a number of other donors have been approached for institutional support to the Ministry of Trade. However, some donors have been reluctant to assist with some of the systemic issues affecting the development of capacity, such as Internet access or the establishment of a trade database. The Ministry of Trade needs urgent assistance to develop both its human and institutional capacity to effectively carry out its many roles. Some assistance is beginning to come through with the support from the Department for International Development (DFID) to the private sector development programme and implementation of a project on administrative barriers to trade and investment.

Long-term Process

Of course, it would make a huge difference to Sierra Leone's effective participation in the WTO if the country had a presence in Geneva, through a permanent mission. However, the financial costs of such an endeavour are almost prohibitive, and an assessment has to be made as to whether the potential benefits of establishing such a presence outweigh the costs, given the relative importance of the EPA for Sierra Leone *vis-à-vis* the WTO.

Sierra Leone's preparation for and participation in the WTO will improve gradually. In the medium to long-term, there is substantial technical assistance being offered from a range of donors, and this will feed into specific projects and programmes currently being undertaken. Sierra Leone has taken a significant step in fielding a stronger delegation to the 2005 WTO Ministerial Conference. The inclusion of a Member of Parliament (MP) and a private sector representative in the delegation is likely to have a beneficial effect on levels of awareness and preparedness of key stakeholders in the Sierra Leone on vital issues of trade policy.

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