

MULTILATERALISM AT A CROSSROADS

WTO PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM

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A report jointly prepared by

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1. Introduction:

2003 was a trying year for international institutions. Early in the year, the US-led war in Iraq led many to ask some fundamental questions regarding the role of the United Nations and its various institutions in matters of war and peace, as well as in post-conflict rebuilding. Later in the year, another multilateral institution, the World Trade Organization, ran into difficulties of its own when its Ministerial meeting (held in Cancun, Mexico in September 2003) concluded in disarray, without an agreement on any of the major issues. This was the second time in four years that a WTO Ministerial meeting had ended this way.

The WTO convened its fourth annual Public Symposium in Geneva eight months after the impasse of the Cancun Ministerial. The Symposium, entitled “Multilateralism at a Crossroads”, provided a good opportunity to assess the issues and the direction of the “Doha round” of trade talks. Indeed, while the divisive issues remained, the acrimony and “pressure-cooker” atmosphere of Cancun seemed to be far enough in the past that a good exchange was possible on several of these issues.

According to the WTO, several hundred non-governmental organizations (NGOs)¹ register to attend the Symposium every year. Once again, Canadian non-governmental groups were well represented, with over 40 Canadians in attendance.

What follows is a report on this event prepared by two of the Canadian participants. Given the comprehensive program and the many overlapping sessions, detailed coverage of every session was not possible. This report is intended to provide a summary and analysis of this year’s symposium from a Canadian perspective. It will do so by summarizing the major themes covered in the session, and Canadian views on those issues. The report will offer suggestions to improve future events regarding content, format and process.

While other Canadian participants were consulted in the preparation of this report, the views contained herein are those of the authors. They do not reflect official Canadian policy, nor the policies or views of either the Canadian Chamber of Commerce or of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL). The authors retain sole responsibility for this report and any errors or omissions contained herein.

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2. Organization of and participation in the Sessions

The symposium consisted of 29 sessions, four of which were organized by the WTO Secretariat (compared to approximately half the previous year). This reflects a conscious effort on the part of participants for active engagement. The remaining sessions were organized by a variety of non-governmental organizations and international agencies, including the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, International Farmers Coalition for Fair and Equitable Agricultural Trade Rules at the WTO, Third

¹ The term “NGO” is used here as the term is generally understood in the WTO context—to refer broadly, and generically, to any non-governmental entity no matter what its structure, membership, or agenda.

World Network, Oxfam, Geneva Women for International Trade, UNICE (the European Employers' Confederation), and the UN Commission for Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The European Commission and the International Monetary Fund organized two and one sessions respectively.

About one-fifth of the sessions dealt with various aspects of agricultural negotiations; a second-fifth addressed perspectives and prospects of developing countries post-Cancun, and a third-fifth of the sessions attempted to tackle the question of how to translate trade liberalization into sustainable development. The remaining sessions dealt with the environment and biodiversity, WTO scope, reform and future prospects; and the challenges and benefits presented by regional trade and agreements and South-South cooperation to the multilateral trading system.

Canadian participation

Over 50 representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations attended from Canada, making it one of the largest national delegations in attendance. Several of these individuals represented interests in the agricultural sector—which should come as no surprise, given the high profile that agricultural issues occupy in the Doha round. However, academics, development organizations, and think tanks were also represented, as was one broad-based Canadian business association. In addition to this extensive non-governmental attendance, four federal government departments were also represented, as were two provincial governments.

Additional observations on Symposium participation

As at previous symposia, US representation was quite thin. Representatives of the US Mission to the WTO were at several sessions, but there were no US government representatives on any panels, no representatives of US business anywhere, and very few US-based NGOs.

Representation from Brazil and Mexico also seemed slim. This is particularly disappointing in the case of Brazil, given the active role that the country is currently playing at the WTO through the G-20. There was also very low participation of Africans and Asians at the event. A greater effort should be devoted to engaging these “missing” countries and regions—at both the governmental and non-governmental levels—at future symposia.

Gender balance was another issue. There was a sharp contrast between the low number of women presenters and the high number of women in the audience. While the Canadian representation in this regard has tended to be evenly split in previous symposia, this year's ratio was closer to 33%.

3. Highlights of Session Discussions

Launched in Doha, Qatar in November 2001, the latest WTO round—referred to as the “Doha Development Agenda” (DDA)—is premised on the understanding that real reform in agriculture is the key to securing growth in developing countries, as well as unlocking the overall negotiations and achieving reform in other areas.

Very little of this has so far materialized, with the only clearly positive development of this round being the agreement on generic drugs. Canada is the only country that has enacted the agreement into law, which was commended several times during the symposium. This step was in keeping with Canadian development concerns in the Doha Round.

Since the negotiating groups were re-activated in February, the mood of negotiators seems to have improved, but progress has been proceeding largely at the technical level. Negotiators have set themselves a new deadline of July 30 for a package of results including a framework for modalities on agriculture, as well as non-agricultural market access and on the Singapore issues. The main stumbling block remains the extent to which references dealing with agricultural subsidies (both domestic and export) and market access can be included in a framework text to satisfy developing countries and particularly the EU and the USA.

In many ways, the situation is much as it has been since Cancun—without a substantive political agreement on agriculture, the rest of the round will go nowhere. Indeed, impending elections in the United States and the upcoming turnover in the European Commission (and the freeze on political decision-making which will no doubt result) make an agreement by the end of July all the more imperative if the round is to make any progress in the near future.

The Symposium came on the heels of the offer by the European Commission offer to put its much-criticized agricultural export subsidies on the table. The Europeans also suggested in their May 9th letter to WTO member states that they might be prepared to drop three of the four divisive Singapore issues -- government procurement, investment and competition policy—although the fourth, trade facilitation, would remain. The announcement was closely followed by two mini-ministerials in London and Paris intended to give momentum to the troubled round.

In spite of the positive statements from these two mini-Ministerials, and from WTO Director-General Supachai Panitchpakdi in the symposium's opening statement, the mood among NGO, academic and government representatives present in Geneva oscillated between guarded optimism and skepticism that some framework text could be agreed by the end of July. Indeed, a certain disbelief in the ability of the DDA to deliver on development was also very much part of the atmosphere at the symposium.

Negotiations in Agriculture

As in previous years, agriculture issues were highly visible throughout the symposium. This is not surprising, as agriculture is very much at the heart of the Doha Round and, indeed, is seen by many as the "linchpin" of the round. Several sessions were organized on the subject, and many substantive points were made over the course of three days.

Once again, the heavy subsidization of agriculture by industrialized countries (particularly the United States and the European Union) came in for intense criticism. The consensus that these subsidies harm farmers in developing countries (as well as those in some developed countries, such as Canada) does not seem to be broadly questioned. It is, obviously, a question of political will. However, it was also noted that elimination of subsidies, while certainly a necessary component of a solution on agriculture, will not solve everything. There are many market access issues--such as

tariffs and the misuse of safety and quality regulations for protectionist purposes—that have little to do with direct subsidies.

Farm groups argued strongly that farm income has to be a higher priority matter. Indeed, one participant noted that some subsidies are in place because the market did not work, and that many commodities are underpriced.

Tariff reduction remains controversial. The “blended formula”— which would combine both the Uruguay Round formula that sets an average reduction (with a minimum reduction per tariff line), and the Swiss formula which would reduce all tariffs horizontally to a maximum ceiling—is still strongly resisted by developing countries. At the symposium, an alternative market access formula had not yet been tabled, although the G-20 had been requested to do so at the Paris mini-Ministerial earlier in May. Some participants noted that, in order to be beneficial, tariff reductions had to be combined with clean market access in order to be truly effective.

Canada’s is pushing for the elimination of all export subsidies in agriculture, as well as rules to ensure that other types of export assistance (such as export credits and food aid) do not become disguised forms of export subsidies. Canada is also seeking (among other things) reduction of trade-distorting domestic support to *de minimis* levels, an overall limit on domestic support of all types, and rules on tariff quotas to ensure that they do not block market access. However, two aspects of Canadian agriculture policy remain intensely controversial, both at home and abroad—supply management and state trading enterprises (such as the Canadian Wheat Board).

Several Canadian participants stated that it was important to clear up “misperceptions” about supply management and other marketing structures, and stated their belief that the WTO has no mandate to dismantle such structures. Regarding state trading enterprises, something for which Canada has also been strongly criticized by some WTO members, one Canadian participant stated that the WTO cannot eliminate the ability to market products such as wheat collectively while allowing multinational agri-food corporations to carry on as normal.

One participant noted an interesting link between competition policy and market concentration, which some Canadian farm organizations identified as an issue. Another participant offered the view that market concentration cannot be effectively dealt with internationally, as there is no international framework on competition, and that there is not likely to be one if the Singapore issues are kept out of the WTO.

WTO Scope (Singapore issues)

One recurring theme at the Symposium was the question of the WTO’s scope, and whether the Organization is taking on too many “non-trade” issues that are not central to its mandate. This has been an issue ever since the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property) agreement came into force, but in the last few years has been particularly acute in the debate over the Singapore issues. These issues have, for the most part, been pushed strongly by the European Union (and, to some extent, by Japan), with equally strong pushback from developing countries as well as from NGOs. (Canada’s approach to the Singapore issues has been to accept “whatever the traffic will bear”—it has generally been supportive of launching negotiations, but has not been one of the main “demandeurs”.)

Under the terms of the Doha Declaration of 2001, negotiations were to be launched on these four issues—investment, competition, trade facilitation, and transparency in government procurement—subject to “explicit consensus” (a term which was never defined, and which has bedeviled talks on the Singapore issues ever since). At Cancun, the debate over these four issues turned on the question of whether they should be “unbundled”—that is, dealt with separately, as opposed to launched (or not launched) into full-fledged negotiations as a group. Since then, the consensus even among the *demandeur* countries is that they are better unbundled. In fact, the European position had progressed to the point where the EU is now willing to relegate three of the four issues for “further study”, and press only for actual negotiations on trade facilitation.

However, even this has proven unacceptable to both developing countries and to NGOs who claim to speak for development concerns. Many participants in the symposium loudly complained that keeping three of the four Singapore issues on the table, even in a “study” context, meant that negotiations might be entertained eventually—this was deemed to be unacceptable. As for trade facilitation, it was argued that even this one subject would overtax both the negotiation and implementation capacities of developing countries, and therefore should be dropped as well.

The ongoing debate over the Singapore issues raises an interesting point: what are the limits of the WTO’s mandate? This is one of the most fundamental questions for the future of the organization. Should it continue to extend its rule-making capacity into other areas of economic governance? Or will the WTO essentially end up as the “World Court” for international trade—in other words, as more of a dispute settlement organization and less of a rule-making body? This question remains unsolved, but if political agreement on new issues remains elusive, it may well be that the WTO is approaching the outer edges of its mandate.

Trade and Development

At the heart of these discussions was the issue of inequality-- within and between countries, and across gender-- and how both protectionism and market opening weigh into these realities. At the same time, there was a recognition that while trade generally enhances welfare, there are winners and losers. Specific issues raised included joblessness, capacity building, adjustment funds, special and differential treatment, and the role of women in increasing trade through their participation in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Overall (not necessarily in individual sessions), the treatment granted to themes dealing with multiple aspects of trade and development throughout the symposium was comprehensive and even-handed. The prevailing mood in sessions was one of skepticism about the prospects of the Doha Development Round to actually deliver on development. There was a sense that too much was promised at the launch of the round in 2001 and a bit of a reality check as to the limitations of multilateral trade liberalization. A few angry voices were heard; one participant openly called the DDA the “Anti-development Round”.

-*Policy Coherence*: this was a recurring topic throughout the symposium, but it was not clear that policy coherence is a consensus view. Some parties seemed to believe that each institution, (the WTO, the International Labour Organization, and UN agencies) should stick to their mandate. Others argued that enhanced policy coherence is vital to tackle global poverty, spur growth and prosperity, and ultimately ensure that trade

liberalization is a vehicle for development. Evelyn Herfkens, UN Secretary General's Executive Coordinator for the Millennium Development Goals and former Dutch ambassador to the WTO, remarked that the UN Millennium goals marked the first time that the UN system, the World Bank and the IMF had come together. Yet, without progress in multilateral trade negotiations the Millennium goals regarding poverty reduction would not be achieved by 2015. Poor policy coherence within each government--where ministers of finance, foreign affairs and health, for example, often pursue mutually incompatible agendas--is equally problematic.

The question of policy coherence also came up in discussions on trade and environment. In addition to mandating negotiations on reducing tariffs on environmental goods and services, the Doha Declaration also set up discussions on clarifying the relationship between the WTO and Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). Several speakers argued that, while it may not necessarily be desirable to write environmental rules directly into WTO agreements, there is an "imbalance" between economic and environmental (and social) governance at the international level, and expressed hope that the DDA can address this in some fashion.

-Policy Space was another notion that came up several times during discussions. Werner Corrales, from the International Center for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD), identified its two central elements as being: a) flexibility for making use of rules of the multilateral trade system, and b) coordination and coherence within multilateral institutions, for example, with respect to official development assistance. In his view, what is needed to enhance policy space is Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) regarding such areas as performance and content requirements, technology transfer and government procurement, for example. What is also needed is Trade Related Capacity Building (TRCB) designed to support the use of policy space, for example with trade diversification. Corrales indicated this is an area for which there is no TRCB, which has tended to focus on adjustment to WTO commitments.

-Women and Trade: the session on the "Impact of women in small, medium and macro enterprises on increasing trade under the WTO agreements" stressed the strong correlation between trade expansion and increase in jobs for women: trade opening encourages growth where there is a comparative advantage which in developing countries tends to be labour intensive and allow employment for women. There was consensus among presenters and participants that gender equality is not a trade problem but a development problem, specifically the fact that women contribute largely to the workforce (for example, in Madagascar three fourth of the labour force are women) but have unequal access to resources. Barbara Mowat (Impact Communications Ltd) was a very credible and interesting Canadian speaker, who ensure a strong Canadian contribution to the session. Moreover, Ambassador Marchi's active and personal participation and involvement in the topic was mentioned and saluted.

Trade and Environment - As in previous years, discussion on the linkage between trade and environment was prominent at the symposium, with a total of five sessions on environment-related topics.

An interesting theme that ran through several of these discussions was that the WTO is far from the only institution or legal regime that is relevant to questions of trade and the environment (and, more fundamentally, to questions of sustainable development). The

United Nations Environment Program, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the World Intellectual Property Organization, and even the International Court of Justice were all cited as institutions and fora whose mandates are also relevant, and in some cases more appropriate, for addressing these questions.

This is not just an issue of “policy coherence” (though, as noted above, that is an important question). In the session on “Global Environmental Governance”, both Tom Crompton of the World Wildlife Fund and Vice Yu of the South centre noted that it is also a question of recognizing the limits of the WTO’s capacity and expertise, as well as the limitations of the Doha Declaration’s mandate. In the session on “Environmental Requirements and Market Access”, Steve Porter of the Center for International Environmental Law and Paulo Ferraciola of InMetro Brazil also noted these limitations with respect to environmental requirements and market access.

In that same session, Pierre Houselman of ISEAL Alliance and Nigel Garbour of EuropGap, noted the role of voluntary standards and codes of good practice, which can build on the legal framework set out in areas such as the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) agreements. However, Paulo Ferraciola noted that the TBT Agreement does not address the equivalency of private standards, which can make matters difficult for developing countries.

Speakers also addressed the impact of trade liberalization on biodiversity, with Alejandro Nijal of El Colegio Mexico and Heidi Bravo of the Swiss Farmer’s Union both noting that there are few benefits to be seen in this regard, even if there have been benefits in terms of prices and yield for certain crops. Paul Martin of the Canadian Mission in Geneva, speaking in that same session, noted the distinction between alien invasive species and GMOs. He made the interesting comment that the SPS agreement would not appreciate the distinction between the two.

Perspectives and prospects for Developing Countries:

A central message coming from presenters was the need for complementary policies to trade liberalization. Kenneth Heydon (OECD) and Guy de Jonquieres (Financial Times) stressed the importance of having national policies and institutions in place to be able to take advantage of trade liberalization and generate sustained growth. Ensuring a more fair distribution of income and increased coherence between trade and development practices also figured prominently in recommendations. They also urged countries to widen the focus beyond the reduction of agricultural subsidies, which positive economic impact, in any case, is bound to be limited. Haydon cited an OECD study which found that 2/3 of gains for development countries will come from liberalization in motor and auto-parts, textiles and processed agricultural goods. Haydon also called on developing countries to gain new export markets. Brazil, for example, has embarked on an ambitious strategy of geographic trade diversification, particularly with other developing countries.

-South-South Trade: *the notions of South-South trade and cooperation have gathered momentum in recent years and were the focus of several sessions. A few, such as Ambassador Alejandro Jara from Chile, were not enthusiastic about the notion of South-South trade and called it “an artificial way to look at the world”, contending that businesses don’t see it that way. In contrast, Lackshmi Puri of UNCTAD referred to*

South-South cooperation as a “promise that didn’t materialize for years” and “an idea whose time has come”. She noted that one underlying feature of S-S trade, particularly in South East Asia, is “complementary competitive continuum” by which rather than competing to sell the same product, countries now cooperate to diversify and jointly enter new markets. Other facts and features of S-S trade, include:

- 43% of developing countries’ trade is with each other;
- South-South trade is growing at double the rate of global trade;
- the composition of manufactures in South-South trade is higher than in developing countries’ exports to developed countries (80% of exports in manufactures are intra-regional);
- China is the engine driving south-South trade (as a hungry importer of commodities, services and goods, and energetic exporter);
- Most South-South trade is intra-regional, driven by regional trade arrangements

-Special and Differential Treatment (SDT): there was some disagreement among developing countries as to the overall efficacy of SDT. Some representatives seemed prepared to make the most of the Doha Declaration’s mandate to review and strengthen SDT provisions. Others, like Ambassador Jara (Chile), argued that developing countries have tended to spend too much political capital on negotiating SDTs, which have ultimately made little difference. Canada is committed to the principle of special and differential treatment, and supports proposals that are conducive to facilitating the integration of developing country members into the WTO. It has, however, argued against proposals that would involve open-ended obligations for technical assistance.

-Technical Assistance (TRTA) and Trade-related Capacity Building (TRCB): The need for better TRTAs was stressed in various sessions. There were questions as to whether the level of these assistance programs was appropriate and whether needs were being at least partially fulfilled. The need for long-term TRTA and TRCB was highlighted by Kenneth Heydon (OECD), specifically with regards to assisting developing countries reap the benefits of trade from increased imports and diversification of exports. Discussions on technical assistance was one of the contexts in which Canada came up, recognizing that Canada is an important provider of TRTAs and contributor, through the WTO Global Trust Fund and the WTO Training Institute. Specifically the Canadian/Egyptian WTO proposal on SPS, requiring that developed countries give technical assistance to developing countries when they establish new SPS requirements, was mentioned by Falou Samb (Agency for International Trade, Information and Cooperation) at the session on “Africa in the Trading System: Facilitating strategic integration”.

-Adjustment Funds: The Trade Implementation Mechanism (TIM), launched in early May 2004 was highlighted in several sessions as an example of policy coherence and support of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the DDA. The session organized by the IMF was small, but well attended as it was one of the first public opportunities to learn first hand about the TIM. Rather disappointingly, participants learnt that the scope of the TIM is very limited and mostly targeted to macro-vulnerabilities related to balance of payments imbalances resulting from trade liberalization, particularly in the smaller economies of the Caribbean and Africa. One objective of the TIM then is to help countries move from a revenue system reliant on import and export duties to one based on consumption taxes, such as the value-added tax. (In this regard it was surprising that

there was no acknowledgement of the regressive nature of the VAT and discussions on ways of un-taxing the poor such as exempting food and medicines.)

Another preoccupation of TIM will be to deal with the impact of the erosion of the EU margin of preference (sugar and bananas) and the impact of the ATC agreement (which replaces the MFA agreement on textiles and clothing--quotas). There was consensus throughout the sessions that the impact will be very strong, that most changes derived from the ATC will be felt in 2005, and that they should have been scaled.

Regionalism Vs. Multilateralism

The debate over whether regional trade arrangements are stumbling blocs or building blocs towards multilateral trade agreements was played out in several sessions throughout the symposium. This is a particularly relevant issue now that the multilateral process appears to have stalled somewhat, and several countries—most notably the United States—are turning to bilateral and plurilateral agreements.

Some participants argued that regional and preferential trade agreements not only cause diversion of trade, but also distract resources and attention away from multilateral negotiations. This is particularly true for smaller countries with limited trade negotiating capacity (a participant from Burkina Faso illustrated this point by remarking that only 4 individuals are doing all the trade negotiations for the country). Smaller forums such as regional and preferential negotiations can provide room for arm-twisting and results can be costly (i.e. issues that do not pass in a multilateral environment are being pushed bilaterally). One of the biggest criticisms of regional and preferential agreements is that they can be complex to administer, particularly regarding rules of origin. Moreover, it is often in the multilateral arena where true gains can be made (i.e. agricultural reform).

The other side of the debate argues that regional trade agreements (RTAs) can act as “laboratories” for multilateral trading arrangements, as they provide the opportunity to liberalize with greater comfort than in a multilateral environment. Moreover RTAs allow both negotiators and business to acquire experience that can then be applied in the multilateral scene. A smaller group of countries, particularly if they share the same language and level of development, can often negotiate faster than in the multilateral arena where the sheer number of countries and competing interests make the process generally slower. Finally, regional trade agreements can also be a push for regional development by encouraging joint infrastructure projects (for example, building roads and bridges), physical integration and reduced transportation costs.

In the end, this is a policy question for member states rather than for the WTO to address, as they are the ones who make the policy choices on where trade agreements are (and are not) negotiated. However, the question does directly affect the WTO’s mandate, both because the WTO has a mandate to monitor regional and bilateral trade agreements and ensure that they are compatible with multilateral rules. On a more broad level, the Organization is intended to be the administrator of a common system of rules. While it can certainly be argued that regional and bilateral agreements can deliver results faster than the multilateral system, it is worth noting that the common rules can indeed become much less “common” as time marches on and new agreements are produced.

Canada, for its part, does not approach this as an “either/or” policy choice. It has long been a dedicated supporter of rules-based multilateralism, but has also combined this in recent years with an active agenda of bilateral, plurilateral and regional trade negotiations. Canada has so far signed free/preferential trade agreements with the United States and Mexico (NAFTA), Chile, Costa Rica and Israel. Canada is also involved in negotiations towards a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and is currently in either negotiations or exploratory talks with Singapore, the Central America Four (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), CARICOM, the Andean Community and the European Union.

4. Final Views and Comments

Overall, participants seemed to have a positive impression of the symposium, but Canadian participants did have some suggestions for improvement. These included:

For Canada:

Canada “should be Norway”, in the words of one participant. In other words, Canada should be providing assistance to enable developing countries to attend the symposium, as the Norwegians have done in the past.

Liaison with Canadian participants in Geneva: participants appreciated the debriefing session with Ambassador Marchi and with staff from the Canadian mission, which preceded the start of the symposium. The wrap-up or closing session that followed at the official end of the symposium, however, went less smoothly largely due to diverging expectations among some of the participants and organizers.

This final session at the Canadian mission was conceived as an opportunity for Canadian participants to gather and share their impressions of the three-day symposium, with the ultimate objective of improving future events. To that end, this year a simple questionnaire requesting feedback on content, process and format was distributed by the CCC and FOCAL and subsequently e-mailed to participants.

Some participants expressed a strong interest in using this final meeting to further discussions sparked by the symposium. With this in mind, one participant suggested involving staff from the Canadian mission, who could respond to questions, and clarify or validate information that participants may have heard throughout the sessions.

In future post-mortem or wrap up sessions, organizers may wish to consider a format that addresses both the need for feedback and some participant's desire for further content discussions. One possibility is to ask 3 to 5 participants representing various sectors/interests (agriculture, environment, business, less developed countries, etc.) at the debriefing before the start of the symposium, to informally report their observations to the group at the wrap-up, to kick start the session.

For the WTO:

Logistics: there was consensus among Canadian participants about the need for a consistent security policy. Some participants were told that they were required to provide passports, while others were allowed to provide alternative documents (such as drivers'

licenses). Another observation broadly shared by participants was the need to redesign identification badges so that participant names are more visible.

On a different note, Canadian participants urged the WTO to help countries from regions poorly represented at the symposium such as Africa, Latin America and Asia, in sending representatives. They recognized, however, that capacity building and technical assistance is much more than “flying in reps. from developing countries to this kind of fora”.

Use of WTO website and publication of participants’ list: it was remarked that the WTO could make better use of its website, for example, to provide biographies of speakers, abstracts of presentations, and a participant’s list ahead of the event. As in previous years, once source of frustration for participants was the fact that a list of those attending the symposium was not published by the WTO but after the event, which severely limits the ability of NGOs to “network” while there. This was allegedly for reasons of participant “privacy”, which is something of a mystery given that other international conferences publish such lists as a matter of course.

Identification of speakers and organizers: a list of speakers (a “Who is who” compendium), their affiliation and credentials was mentioned as desirable, as often, participants were left wondering who exactly the panellists were. Likewise, it was noted that there was little information (often just the acronym) about organizing NGOs. It was recommended that NGOs in charge of organizing a session be asked to provide a description of their core mandate and membership.

Panel conformation, session proliferation and NGO-ownership: there was a marked tendency throughout the event to form panels with speakers with similar points of view. Some participants interpreted the homogeneity of views in many panels as an attempt to avoid conflict or even debate. The session organized by Third World Network stood out as a particular example, though certainly not the only one.

There was also a shared sense among participants that there were many sessions dealing with similar issues, although some times from different perspectives. Occasionally these sessions were concurrent, making the choice of which to attend difficult. While we are mindful that this reality can often be driven by desires for institutional visibility, or sheer “turf” reasons on the part of organizing NGOs, it undermines the objective of improved understanding of complexities surrounding most issues in the WTO agenda as well as a true exchange of views and search of common ground.

We would then recommend seizing opportunities to consolidate some of the sessions by encouraging organizations to jointly host/coordinate sessions. Consolidating sessions is likely to lead to more diverse panel composition, which would allow for greater cross-fertilization, balanced presentation of issues and more interesting exchange among panelists and audience. For example, the sessions on “South-South Trade” and “Regional Trade Agreements”, which were held simultaneously and each respectively provided very positive and rather negative analyses of regional trade agreements, could have benefited from some cross over of panelists.

Should consolidation prove elusive, an alternative suggested by a Canadian participant would be for the WTO Secretariat to organize the sessions of the first two days – thus falling on the WTO the onus of ensuring panelists represent a true variety of views – and leaving the third day for NGOs to organize sessions under structure and modalities chosen by them. In fact, several participants felt that NGOs needed flexibility to organize their sessions as they see fit, as this symposium is one of their only chances to engage with the WTO. It is important, they recommended, not to hamstring the NGOs too much.

Rules of Engagement and allocation of time: some participants commented on the lengthy statements (“speechifying”) in several comments from the floor. Some called for better “rules of engagement” for both chairs and organizing NGOs, to ensure that panels are more consistent. A positive comment coming from those who attended the symposium in previous years was that there was plenty of time to debate in this year’s sessions. There also seemed to be less “frustration” coming from the floor, in that most people who wanted to speak seemed to get the chance to do so. This had been a notable problem in the 2003 symposium.

Concluding session: the majority of participants felt that the symposium ended too abruptly, and that they would have benefited from a final session of concluding remarks. One possible format for such final meeting is to have all or some of the moderators gathering in a plenary to share the main conclusions or salient points of their respective sessions. Such a plenary would provide an opportunity for participants to get a more complete picture of the universe of issues discussed throughout the three days, as well as to jointly generate some reflections and conclusions.

Future agenda: some suggestions of issues to include in the agenda of future WTO symposia, include:

- Services agenda: was next to invisible in this year’s symposium
- Non-agricultural market access: also did not have a high profile
- Mobility of persons (labour mobility, migrations, etc.): This is an issue that is generating growing attention in development and trade circles (for example, a Global Commission on International Migrations, of which Canada is a member, was created by the UN in 2004 to study the issue). Several presenters, including Supachai Panitchpakdi and Evelyn Herfkens, highlighted the significant welfare gains that would accrue to developing countries from further mobility of persons.

Overall, this is a unique event that is worth continuing to support as a forum for exchange on issues of trade, and on its economic and social dimensions, among representatives of all sectors involved – negotiators, lobby groups, academics, NGOs, business, trade unions, multilateral agencies and others. Moreover, robust participation from Canada in WTO public symposia suggests that the event is of interest and relevance to Canadians. This said, this concept of the symposium is one that is evolving and still offers much room for improvement. Based on our own observations and on input from Canadians participating in this event, one central challenge that the WTO secretariat faces is to balance the need to give NGOs a measure of ownership of the event with the need for quality control, to ensure the event continues to provide a balanced treatment of issues and to attract first-rate participants.

Summary of suggestions for future improvement

For Canada:

- Provide assistance to developing countries to send participants
- Reconsider format of wrap up session

For the WTO Secretariat:

- Provide assistance to developing countries to send participants
- Consolidate sessions dealing with similar topics
- Encourage more diversity of views among panelists
- Encourage organizations to invite more women to take part as speakers
- Better rules of engagement
- Include a concluding session for symposium
- Make better use of the WTO website to disseminate information on the event
- Publish list of participants
- Consider inclusion of following issues in next year's agenda: services, non-agricultural market access and mobility of persons