

15 October 2015: SAIIA Roundtable: 'Nairobi and Beyond - What Prospects for the WTO?'

Prof Wilma Viviers and two associates from the TRADE research entity were invited to attend a roundtable convened by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) in Johannesburg on 15 October 2015. Attended by representatives from the NGO, business and academic communities, the roundtable put the spotlight on the character of the multilateral trading system of today, what the aspirations of the advanced and developing economies and LDCs are in the run-up to the WTO's 10th Ministerial Conference in Nairobi in December 2015, and what the outcome of the Nairobi talks are likely to be.

With the architecture of the world having changed dramatically since the Doha Round was launched in 2001, it is perhaps inevitable that progress in the Round has been frustratingly slow. In fact, many would argue that the advent of wide-ranging plurilateral and mega-regional agreements (notably the Trans Pacific Partnership [TPP] and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership [TTIP]) has supplanted the need for the inclusive outcomes envisaged by WTO members when Doha first got underway. Certainly, business communities in many parts of the world do not attach much importance to the multilateral narrative advanced by the WTO, being far more preoccupied with the opportunities presented by global and regional value chains. Furthermore, the resurgence of the US economy and the growing influence of China in a myriad of spheres are rapidly changing regional and global dynamics. Yet without a WTO-led trade agenda, poor countries in particular will become increasingly marginalised and the chasm between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' will widen, to the ultimate detriment of the world as a whole.

While it is difficult to speculate how the Nairobi Ministerial Conference will play out, certain delegates at the roundtable expressed the hope that, at the very least, the cloud surrounding the issue of export subsidies will be lifted and the LDCs will come away with a package of concessions that will substantially boost their agricultural trade and economic development prospects.

Of course, the conclusion (or otherwise) of the Doha Round should not set the pace for countries' development, particularly in Africa. There is much that can be - and is already being - done on the continent to improve trade efficiency, cut costs and adopt a more strategic approach to value chain participation. For South Africa, the message is clear: adapt to the changing world order or lose out to more nimble players elsewhere in the Southern African region and beyond.

Photo (from left): Mr Peter Draper, Prof Wilma Viviers, Ms Ali Parry and Mr Martin Cameron.

