Trade Development: Why Should Country-Based Stakeholders Regularly Visit Geneva?

Country-based support for the "Geneva Frontline" has long been successfully leveraged by industrialised economies in multilateral negotiations. Unfortunately, many developing countries have been slow in connecting their missions in Geneva to country-based stakeholders which has led to huge opportunity costs. As a case in point, during a recent week-long visit to Geneva, East African stakeholders invited by CUTS have been able to provide insightful advice to their missions, better understand the multilateral linkages of trade with other issues, as well as open several technical assistance leads.

Like most developing countries and LDCs, East African countries have taken keen interest in the WTO since its establishment and have invested in developing their capacities for their active participation in the WTO. However, their current capacities are not sufficient to enable their well-informed and active participation in the multilateral trade organisation. While a couple of Geneva-based NGOs provide technical expertise and discussion forums for developing countries on WTO issues, one of the most critical constraints has remained unaddressed: the need for efficient communication channels between WTO missions and the capitals, private sector and grassroots back home.

Indeed, country-based support for the "Geneva Frontline" is a critical factor to successful participation and is extensively leveraged by more advanced economies in trade negotiations.

For several years, CUTS International Geneva has been building capacities for Geneva-capital information bridges in East Africa. Under the project “Promoting Agriculture, Climate and Trade Linkages in the EAC” (PACT EAC), stakeholders have been providing their negotiators with insiders’ views of the trade realities on the ground, while WTO delegates regularly visited the region to brief stakeholders on the status of trade negotiations.

Recently, CUTS International organised a week-long visit to Geneva for country-based East African stakeholders to build their capacity to support their country's multilateral efforts. By regularly visiting Geneva, they would be better able to leverage the presence of their mission and grasp the development opportunities offered by the Geneva scene.

Quick Facts

» Country-based support for the "Geneva Frontline" is a critical factor to successful participation in the WTO.

» Developing countries should consider regularly organising visits of country-based stakeholders to Geneva where they would interact with their missions. This would include not only government officials but also private sector and civil society representatives.

» The slow pace of connecting their missions in Geneva to capital-based stakeholders has led to huge opportunity costs for developing countries. For instance, such visits have the potential to improve access to technical assistance.
Support to Geneva Missions at the WTO

Visiting Geneva on 4-7 May 2015, PACT EAC project stakeholders had the opportunity to acquire a basic understanding of how the WTO operates, the status of negotiations as well as implementation-related issues. First briefed by the WTO Secretariat on the outcome of the General Council meeting held the same week, stakeholders were also briefed by the organizations’ development division on the development aspects of the Doha round. This helped them understand the technicalities of the WTO, which is required if they are to support efficiently their missions in Geneva.

Later during the week, national stakeholders including from the private sector could personally update East African WTO delegates on how climate change has affected agro-processing trade along the value chain. They made several recommendations, encouraging delegates to recognise the potential benefits of green market access to LDCs while stressing the need to protect the region’s agro-industrial development potential.

Several members of the multi-stakeholder delegation invited to Geneva contributed to national studies investigating this relationship between trade and climate change. The Geneva visit was also an opportunity for them to better understand how this relationship is dealt with in multilateral debates.

Synergies in International Negotiations

Over the past few months, East African stakeholders under the PACT EAC project have pointed out the need for trade and climate negotiators to collaborate more closely in order to prevent contradictory commitments. Indeed, countries are expected to commit to GHG emission reduction targets at the UNFCCC COP21 in Paris this year, which may require adopting regulatory measures subjected to WTO rules and procedures. This could be the case with measures such as taxes and tariffs, market-based mechanisms and subsidies.

However, there are only very few people involved in WTO and UNFCCC negotiations and the national support networks and consultations are weak. There are often pockets of knowledge but these pockets are not connected.

Visiting Geneva was a unique opportunity for UNFCCC focal points in EAC countries joining the delegation to interact with their missions and other institutions on trade and climate change linkages a few months from the Paris conference. In this regard, the programme of the week also included a briefing by the UNCTAD Division on International Trade in Goods and Services and Commodities on UNCTAD’s work in linking trade with climate policies and negotiations.

Advocacy for Technical Assistance

Regularly visiting Geneva can also bring new opportunities for Ministry officials to pursue technical assistance. For instance, with support from the mission of Burundi, the Director of Environment in Burundi was able to start talks with the World Meteorological Organization on receiving kits to implement Meteorological stations in the provinces of Burundi.

Other stakeholders were also able to reach out to development partners and share perspectives on the region’s potentials, challenges and needs for technical assistance. They were for instance invited for a welcome reception organised in their honour by the Ambassador of Sweden, whose government has been funding the PACT EAC project for the past four years.

Need for facilitation

Unfortunately, most developing countries lack the resources to plan and organise such visits. Although some organisations like the WTO can facilitate similar visits of country delegations, e.g. to attend trainings, their support is often restricted to government officials. It would however be important that more initiatives facilitate the visit of private sector and the civil society representative, recognising the critical role they have to play in supporting their missions in Geneva.

Meetings in Geneva this week have enlightened me on the critical role trade and climate change negotiations have to play in addressing agriculture processing challenges in Uganda.”

Representative of the Ministry of Agriculture, Uganda