



Trying to Put More “Working” Into Working Groups

A lot of praises and few complaints summed up the April 30 to May 1st Committee on Agriculture Special Session (CoASS) gathering which was held to review the first three months of the Working Groups (WGs) procedure put forward by the chair of the negotiating group, Ambassador Deep Ford (Guyana).

In a nutshell, Members applauded the candidness of the WG discussions which they said provided a deeper understanding on the full spectrum of the agriculture file. However, smaller delegations complained about the frequency and the complexity of the meetings given their limited technical capacities.

The fact that some of the meetings turned into a blame game, targeting specific Members (mostly developing ones), was also described as unhelpful. The negotiating group held a grand total of 17 WG meetings between January and April:

- 5 on domestic support (DS)
- 3 on public stockholding for food security purposes (PSH)
- 2 on market access (MA)
- 2 on the special safeguard mechanism (SSM)
- 1 on export competition (EC)
- 1 on export restrictions (ER)
- 3 on cotton

Shifting Towards a “Negotiation-Oriented Phase”

The process has, according to Ambassador Ford, “achieved its basic rationale” which was to trigger more informal and open exchanges on various questions posed by each WG coordinator. The chair now plans to adjust the next three months’ work to

reflect Members’ feedback on the process with the aim to “move progressively towards a more focused and negotiation-oriented phase.”

The May–July schedule will focus more on proposals with updated inputs and submissions to feed into the discussions, leading to outcomes that would take into consideration special and differential treatment (S&DT) provisions which have been at the center of the U.S.’s denunciations and their insistence on the need for reforms.

For the chair, however, this is precisely why Members “should carefully step on the accelerator, turn the corner, and we might get on the straightaway, with a view towards the finishing line and reach our goal in a timely manner.” The objective remains unchanged: “to have an outline of possible elements and related options for delegates to reflect on during the summer break,” Ambassador Ford stressed.

In the fall, Members will be invited to engage “in a full outcome-oriented process and possibly use various High-Level meetings scheduled in the second half of 2019 as ‘stepping stones’ to advance convergence and facilitate the negotiating process,” the chair wrote.

Three Possible Options

Ambassador Ford said he envisaged three possible non-exclusive outcomes of this whole process leading up to the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) in Astana (renamed as Nur-Sultan in honour of Kazakhstan’s long-time President who resigned this March).

1. *A transparency outcome*: the easiest option of the three, and probably the most realistic one at the moment
2. *An incremental substantive outcome seeking balance but only on a limited scope of selected topics*: in other words, a set of issues that could include cotton, PSH, some elements in domestic support and maybe one or two aspects of market access
3. *An integrated substantive/ broader balanced multi-topic package* i.e. with outcome across all three pillars of the agriculture negotiation (DS, MA, and EC)

If the third option is clearly a recipe for disaster, some officials believe that option number two could be doable given that, thus far, issues that have attracted the most support for Nur-Sultan are DS, PSH, and cotton.

Even though the chair included one or two aspects of MA in his second option, the issue is generally perceived as “very difficult” due to its complexity making it hard to foresee any substantive progress in the short term. “Much would have to be done if progress was to be achieved in this area in the current outcome timeline,” Ambassador Ford stressed.

The U.S., Russia and some Members of the Cairns Group (Australia, New Zealand along with some Latin American countries like Uruguay and Paraguay) are among the few countries pushing for market access.

Although the U.S. has not been specific on what it was actually looking for in that particular area of the talks, Cairns Group Members have been referring to tariff peaks, tariff escalations, tariff simplification, and tariff rate quota (TRQ) administration as some of the issues to focus on first. Russia for its part called on Members to eliminate the agricultural safeguards.

Furthermore, the question of linkages, both within and outside agriculture, has emerged as an issue. While some cautioned against them, others have linked outcomes in agriculture market access, for instance, to services and non-agricultural market access (NAMA) talks.

The only area that seems to gather Members’ support is that of export restrictions, which would constitute a credible potential deliverable at the MC12, as many delegates support the proposed waiver of food purchases by the World Food Programme for non-commercial humanitarian purposes from the application of export restrictions.

“I am fully aware of the obstacles that we face, but I remain more than convinced that we need to intensify our engagement to achieve our collective goal,” Ambassador Ford concluded.

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