

trade hot topics

Doha Decision-Making: Implications of the Consensus and Single-Undertaking Principles for Developing Countries

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Background

Decision-making within the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO) is governed by two key aspects of WTO jurisprudence: the requirement that decisions be formed by consensus; and the single-undertaking principle. The combination of these two elements means that ‘nothing is agreed until everything is agreed by everyone’. The beleaguered progress of the Round has reignited debate regarding the merits of this approach. At the recently concluded 7th Session of the WTO Ministerial Conference (MC7), held in Geneva in late 2009, a number of developing countries demanded that areas of interest to them on which there is already agreement be implemented on an ‘early harvest’ basis, that is, prior to the completion of the Round.¹ However, in spite of these calls, all facets of the Doha Round currently remain part of an indivisible package. The nature of WTO decision-making has also divided analysts for a number of years, with many attributing deadlocks within the Doha Round to the complexity associated with requiring all 153 members to unanimously agree a simultaneous solution to all of their differences. The purpose of this issue of Commonwealth Trade Hot Topics is to review the arguments on either side of this debate and to survey alternative suggestions regarding the conduct of multilateral trade negotiations.²

The logic of WTO decision-making principles

Single-undertaking

Paragraph 47 of the Doha Ministerial Declaration states:

‘... the conduct, conclusion and entry into force of the outcome of the negotiations shall be treated as parts of a single undertaking. However, agreements reached at an early stage may be implemented on a provisional or a definitive basis ...’

Despite the fact that this paragraph clearly contains legal provision for an ‘early harvest’, such a decision would require unanimous consent. As such consent has not been forthcoming, all negotiations within the Doha Round continue to be treated as components of a single-undertaking.

The standard justification for this approach is that it facilitates issue-linkages (i.e. trade-offs). Issue-linkages are at the heart of trade negotiations in which countries offer concessions on their ‘defensive’ interests, namely, sectors that would

¹ See Trade Hot Topics Issue 67 for a fuller account of the 7th WTO Ministerial Conference.

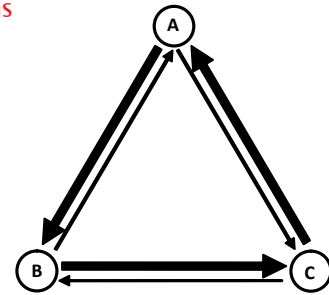
² The focus of this paper is that of the substantive aspects of WTO decision-making. For a valuable discussion of the procedural aspects of WTO decision-making as they relate to least developed countries (LDCs) see Trade Hot Topics Issue 66.

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suffer from import competition, in exchange for reciprocal concessions of benefit to their ‘offensive’ interests, that is, sectors seeking access to foreign markets. This reciprocal exchange of concessions mobilises export-sector support for domestic liberalisation which acts as a political counterweight to import-competing lobbies that would oppose market opening. Without a single-undertaking, a country’s defensive and offensive interests could become delinked. Under these circumstances, a government would be in the position of offering concessions on its defensive interests without an associated guarantee of market access for its offensive interests. As a result governments would be reluctant to offer any concessions, and trade negotiations would be dead in the water.

The notion of issue-linkage is also integral to the logic of multilateral trade negotiations. This idea is illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 1. In the highly stylised world of Figure 1, the balance of each country’s bilateral offensive and defensive interests means that it has stronger defensive interests than offensive interests with respect to the country on its left but stronger offensive interests than defensive interests with respect to the country on its right. This means that there is less scope for trade liberalisation if the countries negotiate bilaterally rather than multilaterally according to the single-undertaking principle. To make this argument concrete, assume that both forms of negotiation would lead to free trade. Under these circumstances, country A would not be willing to conduct a bilateral deal with country C because its defensive interests would lose more than its offensive interests would gain. On the contrary, it would be highly keen to conclude a bilateral deal with country B because its offensive interests would gain more than its defensive interests would lose (however, country B would be reluctant). This situation would repeat in each pairing such that no bilateral deal would be concluded. However, if all three countries negotiate together, then each country can achieve a balance in its offensive and defensive interests by offering concessions to the country on its left in exchange for concessions from the country on its right. Hence free trade is only achievable via multilateralism. Of paramount importance to this mechanism is the requirement that all issues are linked around the system, namely, that negotiations are conducted according to the single-undertaking principle: if the sectors between countries A and B and A and C are treated separately from the sectors between B and C then a multilateral deal will unravel.

Figure 1: Issue-linkages in Multilateral Trade Negotiations



Consensus decision-making

³Article IX of the Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization continues the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) tradition of consensus decision-making. Consensus is deemed to be reached on a matter if no objection is voiced at the meeting at which the decision is to be taken. While Article IX provides for vote-based decision-making in the event that consensus cannot be reached, and on certain issues such as accessions and waivers, in practice decisions within the WTO are generally only formed on the basis of unanimous consent.

As is clear from the section above, the facilitation of multilateral issue-linkage afforded by the single-undertaking principle requires the participation of all parties. Hence, single-undertaking goes hand in hand with consensus decision-making. Moreover, there are a number of other reasons underpinning the use of the consensus principle all of which arise from problems associated with the alternative system of voting. For example, voting could imply compliance without consent if WTO members are forced to adopt measures to which they object. Under such circumstances, voting would further increase the WTO’s encroachment into the sovereignty of its members. However, given that the WTO lacks both the legitimacy and capacity to enforce commitments (aside from permitting retaliation), it is often argued that voting would simply lead to widespread non-compliance with WTO agreements and would thereby undermine the credibility of the multilateral trading system.

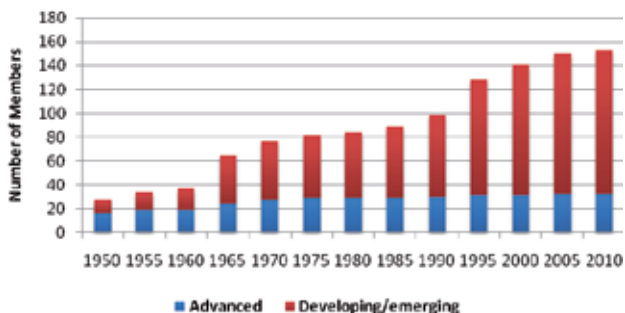
Criticisms of WTO decision-making

Any system of decision-making will necessarily involve some degree of friction, however criticisms of WTO decision-making generally centre on the notion that the cumulative frictions associated

³ This argument stems from Maggi (1999). It is important to recognise that multilateralism also provides the potential for third parties to be compensated for preference erosion. If all countries negotiated bilaterally then each pairing would be less likely to take account of the impact of their concessions on excluded parties.

with a system comprising 153 diverse actors leads to co-ordination failure. This diversity can be seen from Figure 2, which shows the expansion of GATT/WTO membership across time.⁴

Figure 2: GATT/WTO Membership across Time



Numerous commentators have noted that consensus decision-making increases the chances of co-ordination failure among such a large number of negotiating parties because it means that each country has a de facto veto. As posited by Ehlermann and Ehring (2005, p.65), ‘in purely mathematical terms, one has to recognise that the likelihood of at least one member opposing a decision increases with the number of members’. Moreover, as argued by Low (2009, p.2), ‘unanimity in decision-making imparts a bias towards lowest-common-denominator outcomes’ which means that ‘progress, when made, comes at a slow pace’. This result is exacerbated by the fact that the diversity now inherent within WTO membership means that the lowest-common-denominator is increasingly elusive.

Several authors also contend that progress is compounded further by the fact that the balance of power in the GATT/WTO has gradually shifted away from developed countries which, because of the consensus rule, causes them to feel growingly disenfranchised with multilateral trade negotiations. As can be seen from Figure 2, developing countries now constitute the majority of what was once a rich-country club. Collier (2006) and Baldwin (2006) offer a pessimistic prognosis. They posit that a substantial contingent of developing country WTO members are sufficiently marginalised in the global economy that they have little to gain from their own trade liberalisation and little to bring to the bargaining table. Moreover, many developing countries liberalised tariffs on a unilateral basis (often as part of aid conditionality) prior to the Doha Round. Thus, for the time being, their primary motivation for participation in the WTO negotiations is to obtain unreciprocated concessions (or at best reciprocal concessions based on their past liberalisations) from larger countries. This behaviour conflicts with the basic premise of the

WTO as a mediator of mutual reduction in barriers to trade and, because of the unanimity required for agreement, jeopardises the prospects of a successful conclusion to the Doha Round. Indeed, Collier (2006, p.1428) argues that ‘developing countries seek a transfer and developed countries seek a bargain’ thus ‘any deal that is signalled as acceptable by the developed countries risks being seen as unacceptable by developing countries’.

While the pace of progress on any one agenda item is retarded by the consensus decision-making rule, the fact that all agenda items must be agreed before conclusion means that progress in the Doha Round is painfully slow. It is important to note this approach considerably augments the bargaining power of countries that can afford to wait the longest for the implementation of agreements, that is, many large developed countries. As such, rather than ‘levelling the playing field’ WTO decision-making rules are viewed by many as exacerbating power asymmetries. For highly trade-dependent countries, such as many small and vulnerable economies (SVEs) and least developed countries (LDCs) within the Commonwealth, the delay in market liberalisation this entails is particularly damaging. Hence, the widespread calls for an ‘early harvest’ of key development-centred outcomes at the MC7.

Moreover, the benefits of multilateral issue-linkage as espoused in the previous section only pertain when offensive and defensive issues can be balanced around the system. In terms of Figure 1, if one country is a large market to which both other countries have strong offensive interests, then the large country would lose out from multilateral bargaining conducted according to the single-undertaking principle. It would prefer to divide-and-conquer via bilateral deals. In the context of the Doha Round this may also explain the proclivity of many large countries to engage in regional rather than multilateral deals and the negative view held of this behaviour by the majority of developing countries.

Suggested alternatives

Short term

From the analysis in this paper, it is clear that the rationale underpinning the single-undertaking and consensus principles would not necessarily be undermined by an early harvest on some key development-centred issues. For example, granting early duty-free-quota-free market access (DFQF) for least developed countries, which was pledged at

⁴ Figure 2 draws on data from the WTO website as well as International Monetary Fund country classifications.

the Hong Kong WTO Ministerial in 2005, would imply minimal impact on issue-linkage trade-offs because it has already been agreed that LDCs will be exempt from making tariff reductions themselves. Moreover, some issues, such as trade facilitation, are in the interests of all WTO members and are relatively independent of the rest of the negotiating package. Hence, the provision in Paragraph 47 of the Doha Ministerial Declaration to allow the implementation of discrete agreements in advance of the overall conclusion of the Round could be utilised without detriment to the remainder of the 'single-undertaking'.

Long term

Numerous more fundamental suggestions have been ventured for altering WTO decision-making procedures to more effectively mediate co-ordination among the WTO's large and diverse membership. For example, Collier (2006) contends that co-ordination failure can be circumvented if coalitions are rationalised and formalised. This would involve the establishment of a 'negotiating board' consisting of veto-endowed seats for big players and powerful groupings such as: the USA, the European Union, other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, the big developing countries (i.e. China, India, Mexico, Brazil, etc.), other middle-income countries and other low-income countries. According to this suggestion, no other party would have a veto; each group would develop its own intra-group decision-making criteria. Collier posits that, by limiting the number of seats around the table, this solution would lead to more expeditious decision-making.

Collier also argues that developing countries would be more eager to offer concessions to each other if such concessions were not automatically extended to developed countries via the most favoured nation (MFN) rule. To facilitate this, Collier suggests that the MFN rule be modified to create a two-tier WTO system in which the automatic extension of concessions applies only to developed country members.

More drastic multi-tier solutions involve implementing 'variable geometry' within the WTO, namely, relaxing the single-undertaking restriction and thereby making the WTO an 'umbrella' institution circumscribing a range of plurilateral agreements, participation in which would be on a purely voluntary basis. According to proponents of this approach, variable geometry would allow coalitions of the willing to proceed unhindered by

the objections of others and thus impasse would be less likely to arise. Many authors note that variable geometry is not without historical precedent in the multilateral trade negotiating system. For example, the Tokyo Round of the GATT established a number of 'codes' covering issues such as 'Trade in Civil Aircraft', the 'Arrangement on Bovine Meat' and the 'Agreement on government procurement' (AGP) which were undertaken voluntarily. Lawrence (2006) suggests that a similar approach be adopted in the WTO as was utilised in the AGP. Thus, all members would be free to negotiate agreements but ratification would be on a voluntary basis. To avoid free-riding, Lawrence proposes that non-signatories do not receive the benefits of the agreement, that is, the MFN principle should only apply within the 'clubs' of those that ratify the agreement. Others have suggested that agreements should proceed on a 'critical mass' basis when the lion's share of WTO membership is on-board. Low (2009) argues that as long as excluded parties are suitably small in terms of market share, there would be no need to deny them MFN treatment.

Indeed, these ideas have been floated in some areas of the Doha Round already. For example, the sectoral initiatives of NAMA (non-agricultural market access) negotiations are envisaged to involve a critical mass of countries negotiating tariff cuts on a selected range of products that go beyond the standard tariff reduction levels. Similarly, services negotiations are generally accepted as proceeding on a plurilateral basis whereby only major players tend to make requests for concessions of each other and the vast majority of developing countries are not requested to make any concessions.

Despite the manifest virtues of the variable geometry approach, many authors note that it is no panacea. Lawrence (2006) worries that a club approach may limit the ability of WTO members to engage in issue-linkage which, as discussed above, is an important feature of multilateralism. Moreover, Sutherland et al. (2004) contend that variable geometry is a retrograde and divisive step that many members would find unpalatable. Indeed, this sentiment is evidenced by the objections to the EU's proposal to continue 'Singapore issues' negotiations on a voluntary basis outside of the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) as well as the controversy that surrounds the NAMA sectoral initiatives.

Given the rigidities it implies, many analysts also advocate jettisoning the consensus rule in favour of voting. However, aside from introducing the

problems associated with majority-voting described above, relaxing the consensus decision-making principle would be viewed by many as a leeching of their power. Developing countries would worry that the removal of their de facto veto would diminish their capacity to influence outcomes because of their relatively weak bargaining power. Concomitantly, developed countries would worry that the adoption of a voting mechanism would diminish their capacity to influence outcomes because of their relatively small number. Moreover it is unlikely that large countries would find a one-vote-per-country system acceptable, hence prior agreement would have to be reached on voting shares. However, as noted by Low (2009), it is widely accepted that the WTO membership currently lacks sufficient cohesion and commonality of purpose to make voting a practical option in the near future.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the fraught nature of Doha Round negotiations, the WTO's decision-making principles imbue considerable complexity into a system comprising 153 countries with wildly differing interests and a wide scope of negotiating issues. However, these are not arbitrary principles devoid of merit; there are very good reasons to structure multilateral trade negotiations around the consensus and single-undertaking rules. The analysis provided in this paper raises two pertinent questions that must be addressed when considering whether these rules need reform:

- Is the complexity that these rules imbue surmountable?
- Can multilateral trade negotiations survive without these rules?

The beleaguered progress of the Doha Round does not make answering the first question easy. Opinions are divided – in the wake of the MC7 conference some commentators made it clear that they had serious reservations as to whether the Doha Round could ever be concluded. However, even if the complexity can be surmounted, a further question arises as to whether WTO members have the patience and resources to expend in the process of doing so. As the statements made by many WTO members at the MC7 show, patience is wearing increasingly thin. What is clear is that developing countries suffer disproportionately from the delay that complexity implies.

The second question does not admit an easy answer either. If the Doha deadlock cannot be broken, it is unlikely that multilateral negotiations will be able

to continue in their current form. However, no clear programme of reform has yet been ventured. Any successful reform programme would need to balance the requirement to introduce greater flexibility into the system with the fact that some of the key benefits of multilateralism are inexorably intertwined with the decision-making process as it stands. This paper has highlighted that, while currently controversial, variable geometry and critical mass decision-making are promising avenues for future reform that warrant further investigation. Moreover, in the meantime, the analysis in this paper suggests that immediate steps could be taken to lessen the costs associated with the current set-up of WTO decision-making to developing countries without necessarily undermining the benefits. For example, early implementation of DFQF for LDCs and trade facilitation measures would be unlikely to do harm to the benefits of the single-undertaking principle.

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ISSN: 2071-8527 (print) **ISSN: 2071-9914** (online)

Series editor: Dr Mohammad A Razzaque
Produced by the Economic Affairs Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat

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