

Virtually all decisions in the WTO are taken by consensus among all member countries.

Who we are

There are a number of ways of looking at the World Trade Organization. It is an organization for trade opening. It is a forum for governments to negotiate trade agreements. It is a place for them to settle trade disputes. It operates a system of trade rules. Essentially, the WTO is a place where member governments try to sort out the trade problems they face with each other.

The WTO was born out of negotiations, and everything the WTO does is the result of negotiations. The bulk of the WTO's current work comes from the 1986–94 negotiations called the Uruguay Round and earlier negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The WTO is currently the host to new negotiations, under the 'Doha Development Agenda' launched in 2001.

Where countries have faced trade barriers and wanted them lowered, the negotiations have helped to open markets for trade. But the WTO is not just about opening markets, and in some circumstances its rules support maintaining trade barriers – for example, to protect consumers or prevent the spread of disease.

At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations. These documents provide the legal ground rules for international commerce. They are essentially contracts, binding governments to keep their trade policies within agreed limits. Although negotiated and signed by governments, the goal is to help producers of goods and services, exporters, and importers conduct their business, while allowing governments to meet social and environmental objectives.

The system's overriding purpose is to help trade flow as freely as possible – so long as there are no undesirable side effects – because this is important for economic development and well-being. That partly means removing obstacles. It also means ensuring that individuals, companies and governments know what the trade rules are around the world, and giving them the confidence that there will be no sudden changes of policy. In other words, the rules have to be 'transparent' and predictable.

Trade relations often involve conflicting interests. Agreements, including those painstakingly negotiated in the WTO system, often need interpreting. The most harmonious way to settle these differences is through some neutral procedure based on an agreed legal foundation. That is the purpose behind the dispute settlement process written into the WTO agreements.

A brief history

The WTO began life on 1 January 1995 but its trading system is half a century older. Since 1948, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) had provided the rules for the system. Whereas GATT had mainly dealt with trade in goods, the WTO and its agreements now cover trade in services, and in traded inventions, creations and designs (intellectual property).



What we stand for

The WTO agreements are lengthy and complex because they are legal texts covering a wide range of activities. But a number of simple, fundamental principles run throughout all of these documents. These principles are the foundation of the multilateral trading system.

Non-discrimination

A country should not discriminate between its trading partners and it should not discriminate between its own and foreign products, services or nationals.

More open

Lowering trade barriers is one of the most obvious ways of encouraging trade; these barriers include customs duties (or tariffs) and measures such as import bans or quotas that restrict quantities selectively.

Predictable and transparent

Foreign companies, investors and governments should be confident that trade barriers should not be raised arbitrarily. With stability and predictability, investment is encouraged, jobs are created and consumers can fully enjoy the benefits of competition – choice and lower prices.

More competitive

Discouraging 'unfair' practices, such as export subsidies and dumping products at below cost to gain market share; the issues are complex, and the rules try to establish what is fair or unfair, and how governments can respond, in particular by charging additional import duties calculated to compensate for damage caused by unfair trade.

More beneficial for less developed countries

Giving them more time to adjust, greater flexibility and special privileges; over three-quarters of WTO members are developing countries and countries in transition to market economies. The WTO agreements give them transition periods to adjust to the more unfamiliar and, perhaps, difficult WTO provisions.

Protect the environment

The WTO's agreements permit members to take measures to protect not only the environment but also public health, animal health and plant health. However, these measures must be applied in the same way to both national and foreign businesses. In other words, members must not use environmental protection measures as a means of disguising protectionist policies.

Understanding the WTO

Equal treatment is one of the basic principles of the multilateral trading system.



What we do

The WTO is run by its member governments. All major decisions are made by the membership as a whole, either by ministers (who usually meet at least once every two years) or by their ambassadors or delegates (who meet regularly in Geneva).

While the WTO is driven by its member states, it could not function without its Secretariat to coordinate the activities. The Secretariat employs over 600 staff, and its experts – lawyers, economists, statisticians and communications experts – assist WTO members on a daily basis to ensure, among other things, that negotiations progress smoothly, and that the rules of international trade are correctly applied and enforced.

Trade negotiations

The WTO agreements cover goods, services and intellectual property. They spell out the principles of liberalization, and the permitted exceptions. They include individual countries' commitments to lower customs tariffs and other trade barriers, and to open and keep open services markets. They set procedures for settling disputes. These agreements are not static; they are renegotiated from time to time and new agreements can be added to the package. Many are now being negotiated under the Doha Development Agenda, launched by WTO trade ministers in Doha, Qatar, in November 2001.

Implementation and monitoring

WTO agreements require governments to make their trade policies transparent by notifying the WTO about laws in force and measures adopted. Various WTO councils and committees seek to ensure that these requirements are being followed and that WTO agreements are being properly implemented. All WTO members must undergo periodic scrutiny of their trade policies and practices, each review containing reports by the country concerned and the WTO Secretariat.

Dispute settlement

The WTO's procedure for resolving trade quarrels under the Dispute Settlement Understanding is vital for enforcing the rules and therefore for ensuring that trade flows smoothly. Countries bring disputes to the WTO if they think their rights under the agreements are being infringed. Judgements by specially appointed independent experts are based on interpretations of the agreements and individual countries' commitments.

Building trade capacity

WTO agreements contain special provision for developing countries, including longer time periods to implement agreements and commitments, measures to increase their trading opportunities, and support to help them build their trade capacity, to handle disputes and to implement technical standards. The WTO organizes hundreds of technical cooperation missions to developing countries annually. It also holds numerous courses each year in Geneva for government officials. Aid for Trade aims to help developing countries develop the skills and infrastructure needed to expand their trade.

Outreach

The WTO maintains regular dialogue with non-governmental organizations, parliamentarians, other international organizations, the media and the general public on various aspects of the WTO and the ongoing Doha negotiations, with the aim of enhancing cooperation and increasing awareness of WTO activities.



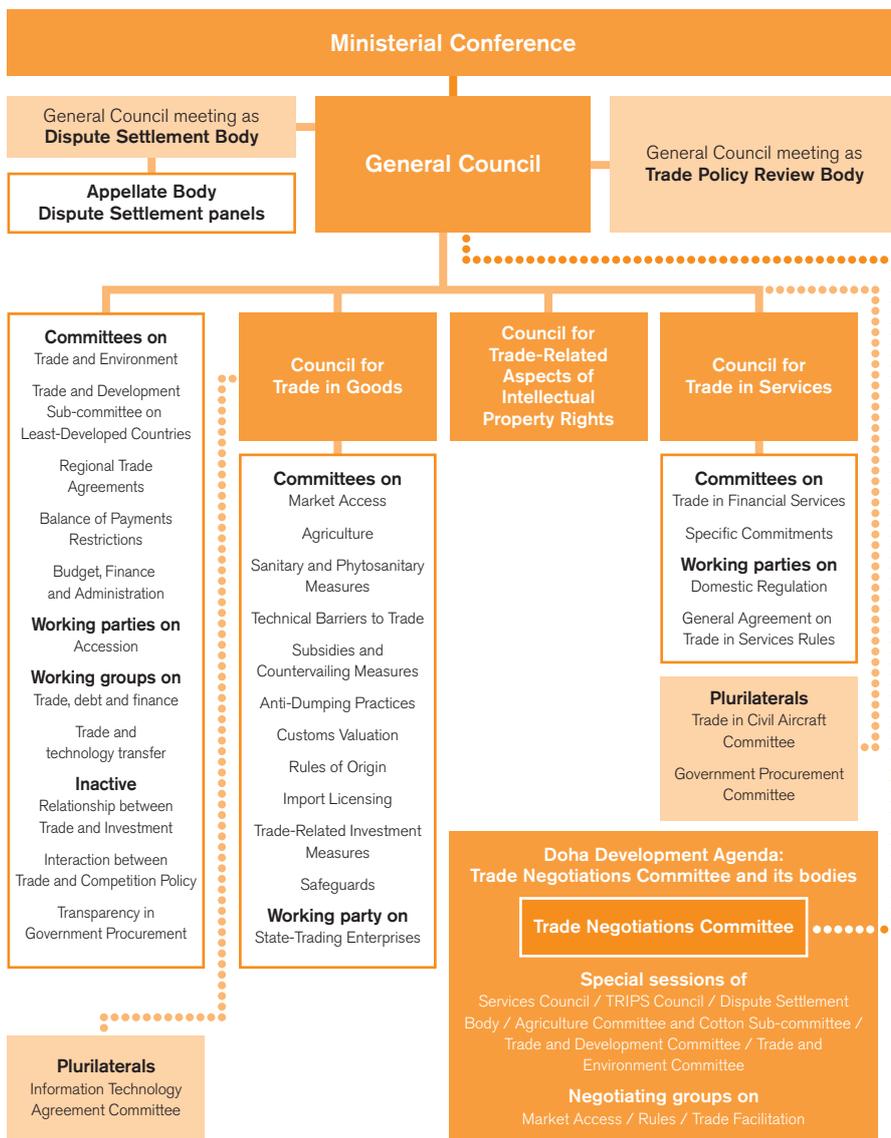
How it all comes together

The WTO's top-level decision-making body is the Ministerial Conference which usually meets every two years.

Below this is the General Council (normally ambassadors and heads of delegation in Geneva, but sometimes officials sent from members' capitals) which meets several times a year in the Geneva headquarters. The General Council also meets as the Trade Policy Review Body and the Dispute Settlement Body.

At the next level, the Goods Council, Services Council and Intellectual Property (TRIPS) Council report to the General Council.

Numerous specialized committees, working groups and working parties deal with the individual agreements and other areas such as the environment, development, membership applications and regional trade agreements.



* All WTO members may participate in all councils and committees, with the exceptions of the Appellate Body, Dispute Settlement panels and plurilateral committees.

Understanding the WTO

Decisions are taken through various councils and committees, whose membership consists of all WTO members.

The WTO currently has 153 members accounting for almost 90 per cent of world trade.

About two-thirds of the WTO's membership are developing countries.



Membership of the WTO (as of 31 December 2009)

Member*	Year of accession	Member	Year of accession	Member	Year of accession
Albania	2000	Chile	1995	Gabon	1995
Angola	1996	China	2001	The Gambia	1996
Antigua and Barbuda	1995	Colombia	1995	Georgia	2000
Argentina	1995	Congo	1997	Germany	1995
Armenia	2003	Costa Rica	1995	Ghana	1995
Australia	1995	Côte d'Ivoire	1995	Greece	1995
Austria	1995	Croatia	2000	Grenada	1996
Bahrain, Kingdom of	1995	Cuba	1995	Guatemala	1995
Bangladesh	1995	Cyprus	1995	Guinea	1995
Barbados	1995	Czech Republic	1995	Guinea Bissau	1995
Belgium	1995	Democratic Republic of the Congo	1997	Guyana	1995
Belize	1995	Denmark	1995	Haiti	1996
Benin	1996	Djibouti	1995	Honduras	1995
Bolivia	1995	Dominica	1995	Hong Kong, China	1995
Botswana	1995	Dominican Republic	1995	Hungary	1995
Brazil	1995	Ecuador	1996	Iceland	1995
Brunei Darussalam	1995	Egypt	1995	India	1995
Bulgaria	1996	El Salvador	1995	Indonesia	1995
Burkina Faso	1995	Estonia	1999	Ireland	1995
Burundi	1995	European Union**	1995	Israel	1995
Cambodia	2004	Fiji	1996	Italy	1995
Cameroon	1995	Finland	1995	Jamaica	1995
Canada	1995	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	2003	Japan	1995
Cape Verde	2008	France	1995	Jordan	2000
Central African Republic	1995			Kenya	1995
Chad	1996			Korea, Republic of	1995

* Members are mostly governments but can also be customs territories.

** On 1 December 2009, the *Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community* (done at Lisbon, 13 December 2007) entered into force. On 29 November 2009, the WTO received a Verbal Note (WT/L/779) from the Council of the European Union and the Commission of the European Communities stating that, by virtue of the *Treaty of Lisbon*, as of 1 December 2009, the European Union replaces and succeeds the European Community.



Joining the WTO

The WTO is open to states or customs territories with full autonomy over their foreign economic relations. To become a WTO member, a government has to bring its economic and trade policies in line with WTO rules and principles and negotiate with individual trading partners specific concessions and commitments that it will apply to its trade in goods and services. It can take many years to become a member of the WTO, which requires the full support of the existing membership. However, the accession process is designed to ensure that new members are able to participate fully in the multilateral trading system from the first day of joining.

No new members joined the WTO in 2009, although progress was made in many of the accession negotiations under way. As of 31 December 2009, 29 governments were seeking WTO entry. A report by the Director-General on developments in accessions in 2009 was published in January 2010.

Governments seeking to join the WTO (as of 31 December 2009)

Afghanistan	Lebanon
Algeria	Liberia
Andorra	Libya
Azerbaijan	Montenegro
Bahamas	Russia
Belarus	Samoa
Bhutan	São Tomé and Príncipe
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Serbia
Comoros	Seychelles
Equatorial Guinea	Sudan
Ethiopia	Tajikistan
Iran	Uzbekistan
Iraq	Vanuatu
Kazakhstan	Yemen
Lao People's Democratic Republic	

Before joining the WTO, a new member has to gain the full support of the WTO membership.

Member	Year of accession	Member	Year of accession	Member	Year of accession
Kuwait	1995	Nicaragua	1995	Solomon Islands	1996
Kyrgyz Republic	1998	Niger	1996	South Africa	1995
Latvia	1999	Nigeria	1995	Spain	1995
Lesotho	1995	Norway	1995	Sri Lanka	1995
Liechtenstein	1995	Oman	2000	Suriname	1995
Lithuania	2001	Pakistan	1995	Swaziland	1995
Luxembourg	1995	Panama	1997	Sweden	1995
Macao, China	1995	Papua New Guinea	1996	Switzerland	1995
Madagascar	1995	Paraguay	1995	Chinese Taipei	2002
Malawi	1995	Peru	1995	Tanzania	1995
Malaysia	1995	Philippines	1995	Thailand	1995
Maldives	1995	Poland	1995	Togo	1995
Mali	1995	Portugal	1995	Tonga	2007
Malta	1995	Qatar	1996	Trinidad and Tobago	1995
Mauritania	1995	Romania	1995	Tunisia	1995
Mauritius	1995	Rwanda	1996	Turkey	1995
Mexico	1995	Saint Kitts and Nevis	1996	Uganda	1995
Moldova	2001	Saint Lucia	1995	Ukraine	2008
Mongolia	1997	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	1995	United Arab Emirates	1996
Morocco	1995	Saudi Arabia	2005	United Kingdom	1995
Mozambique	1995	Senegal	1995	United States of America	1995
Myanmar	1995	Sierra Leone	1995	Uruguay	1995
Namibia	1995	Singapore	1995	Venezuela,	
Nepal	2004	Slovak Republic	1995	Bolivarian Republic of	1995
Netherlands	1995	Slovenia	1995	Viet Nam	2007
New Zealand	1995			Zambia	1995
				Zimbabwe	1995

A year in review

At the Seventh Ministerial Conference in 2009, ministers recognized the crucial role of the rules-based multilateral trading system in mitigating the effects of the economic crisis and focused on what the WTO could do to assist economic recovery.

Trade negotiations

Consistent high-level expressions of support for an early conclusion of the Doha Round failed to translate into the necessary breakthroughs in the detailed talks in Geneva. Nevertheless, useful technical work continued in the negotiating groups on agriculture and non-agricultural market access (NAMA). Other negotiations also advanced. Against the backdrop of the global economic crisis, the WTO Director-General, who chairs the Trade Negotiations Committee, highlighted the significant contribution that a successful conclusion to the Round could make in combating recession and social instability.

A series of international gatherings in 2009 provided strong political support for the negotiations. Meetings of the G-20 underscored the need to reject protectionism and isolationism in times of financial uncertainty, and committed its members to strive for agreement on agriculture and NAMA modalities so as to conclude the Doha Round in 2010. In September the G-20 called for a WTO meeting to take stock of progress in the negotiations by the end of March 2010. However, these declarations of support for bringing the Doha Round to a speedy conclusion failed to translate into a breakthrough in the talks in Geneva.

See page 14

Implementation and monitoring

Following a gap of several years, WTO members agreed in May 2009 that the Seventh Ministerial Conference would take place in Geneva from 30 November to 2 December 2009. Ministers met against the backdrop of the financial and economic crisis to review all areas of the WTO's work. The conference was attended by nearly 3,000 delegates representing all 153 WTO members as well as 56 observers.

Many speakers welcomed the WTO Secretariat's recent series of reports monitoring governments' trade measures during the economic crisis, which they said was useful both as a means of making information available and for countries to exercise peer pressure on each other to avoid damaging protectionist reactions. In summing up, the Chair of the Ministerial Conference said that ministers had recognized the crucial role of the rules-based multilateral trading system in mitigating the effects of the crisis, and had focused on what the WTO could do to assist economic recovery.

Throughout the year, WTO councils and committees continued to monitor the implementation of WTO agreements and to provide a forum for discussion on various issues. In 2009, 37 new regional trade agreements were notified to the WTO, the largest number in any year since the WTO was established.

See page 28

Dispute settlement

In 2009 the total number of disputes brought to the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) since the WTO's creation in 1995 topped 400. During the year, the DSB received 14 notifications from WTO members formally requesting consultations under the Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU). Since 1995, WTO members have initiated, on average, about 27 disputes each year under the provisions of the DSU.

Of the 402 cases filed up to the end of 2009, roughly half were eventually settled directly between the parties following consultations mandated by the DSU, without going into litigation. The vast majority of the remaining cases were settled satisfactorily through litigation. Director-General Pascal Lamy noted that "this is surely a vote of confidence in a system which many consider to be a role model for the peaceful resolution of disputes in other areas of international political or economic relations".

On 15 December 2009 the European Union concluded agreements with the United States and Latin American banana-producing nations intended to bring to an end the longest-running dispute in the WTO. The dispute concerned the preferential treatment that the European Union gave to the import of bananas from African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

See page 80



The Seventh Ministerial Conference was held in Geneva from 30 November to 2 December 2009.

Building trade capacity

The Second Global Review of Aid for Trade took place at the WTO in July 2009. Held in the midst of the financial crisis, the event signalled continued determination to honour commitments to help developing countries, especially least-developed countries (LDCs), in using trade as a vehicle for economic growth and poverty reduction. This determination was underlined by new Aid for Trade pledges from France, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The two-day meeting was attended by heads of international financial institutions, international organizations, ministers and other dignitaries.

The Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) for trade-related assistance to LDCs became effectively operational in 2009. By the end of the year, 47 LDCs were involved in the EIF process, and the EIF Trust Fund had risen to US\$ 90 million. Capacity-building initiatives, market access for LDCs and the Aid for Trade initiative were some of the issues discussed in 2009 by the Committee on Trade and Development and its sub-committees.

In 2009 a total of some 460 trade-related technical assistance activities were provided by the WTO. These included Geneva-based activities as well as those held in WTO member countries. The majority were organized in partnership with other international organizations.

See page 104

Outreach

On 6 September 2009 the WTO opened its doors to the public for the first time. About 5,000 people came to learn more about the WTO, its work, staff, membership, artistic treasures and its historic lakeside building. All proceeds from the event were donated to a Geneva-based association which helps local children.

The 2009 Public Forum, held in Geneva in late September, provided nearly 1,300 participants with the opportunity to express their views and voice their concerns on all aspects of the multilateral trading system. Some 43 sessions were held over the three-day period. A total of 435 civil society organizations from 61 countries were accredited to attend the Seventh Ministerial Conference at the end of 2009. Of the 61 countries, about half were developing or least-developed countries.

In 2009 the WTO Secretariat launched a monthly newsletter to inform parliamentarians of the latest developments at the WTO. It also organized three regional workshops for parliamentarians, in cooperation with regional parliamentary associations, and continued to cooperate with a variety of intergovernmental organizations. It maintained regular contact with journalists, in Geneva and around the world, and hosted nearly 160 information briefings involving almost 4,800 participants. Total page views of the website were over 82 million.

See page 118

Did you know?

2,792

delegates representing all 153 WTO members as well as 56 observers attended the Seventh Ministerial Conference in Geneva

402

trade disputes had been brought to the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism, as of end 2009, since the WTO was created in 1995

37

new regional trade agreements were notified to the WTO in 2009, the largest annual total since the establishment of the WTO

5,000

people or more attended the WTO's first Open Day

460

training activities were provided by the WTO in 2009 to help countries learn more about the multilateral trading system



Trade promises to be an important part of the economic recovery, especially for developing countries.

PASCAL LAMY, DIRECTOR-GENERAL

A message from the WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy

When a tornado strikes, only the mostly firmly rooted structures can withstand its force. The flimsier the foundations, the greater the damage.

In 2009, economies large and small across the world felt the tornado-like force of the financial crisis. The battering taken by the world economy was as bad as anything in the last 70 years and countries struggled to weather the storm. Trade was also hit hard. A 12 per cent contraction in the volume of global trade was the largest such decline since World War II.

Trade contraction would have been catastrophic if countries had slipped into the kind of protectionism that was witnessed in the 1930s. The system of trade rules which embody the WTO provided the foundations to keep markets open and help governments resist the temptation of short-term protectionist measures. In fact, throughout 2009 government-applied trade-restrictive measures affected a mere 0.8 per cent of global imports.

Governments showed consistent restraint, but with more than 200 million people out of work – including 27 million who lost their jobs during the crisis last year – politicians will continue to face strong pressure to curb imports. We must remain vigilant. Yielding to such pressure would, of course, be counterproductive and would be ill-timed given that today, we are seeing a recovery of world trade. After the dramatic fall in 2009, we now forecast a rebound in world trade of about 9.5 per cent this year and trade promises to be an important part of the economic recovery, especially for developing countries.

Ensuring that trade finance is available in all regions of the world, to smaller and medium-sized enterprises and to smaller banks, is an important component in the recovery of world trade. Although collapsing demand and business investment were the principal reasons behind the sharp trade contraction in 2009, a shortage of available trade finance was also a contributing factor. Things have stabilized somewhat in 2010, with more funds available and risk premiums declining. But there are still pockets around the world, particularly in Africa and Eastern and Central Europe, where much-needed finance is simply not affordable even for creditworthy borrowers. Some 80 to 90 per cent of world trade is underpinned by trade finance so the consequences of a drying-up of trade finance are enormous. At the request of members, the WTO has continued to raise awareness of this problem and help foster a dialogue among key actors in this important area of international banking.

We welcomed the G-20's pledge in April of last year to provide additional resources for trade finance. To monitor the impact of this pledge, I regularly host at the WTO a meeting of trade finance bankers, international financial institutions and regulators. The latest such meeting was held on 18 May to monitor the state of the market ahead of the G-20 summit in Toronto in June. The common view was that the US\$ 250 billion provided by the G-20 to support trade finance has been instrumental in reviving liquidity and that this support should continue, at least for the time being.

The conclusion of the Doha Round of trade talks is also crucial to the global recovery from the financial crisis. It is estimated that the implementation of this trade round would inject some 300 to 400 billion dollars a year into the global economy, making it a very low-cost global economic stimulus package.

At the end of March 2010, we took stock of where we stand in the Doha Round. Chairs of the negotiating groups identified areas of progress as well as the gaps that remain. Where the gaps are clear, there is wide recognition that political decisions will be needed to close them. Where the size of the gaps are less clear, further technical work will be required before moving towards the finishing line.

While it is obviously disappointing that we are not closer to our ultimate goal, everyone is still very much committed to the mandate of the Round and to its successful conclusion. I remain convinced that the multilateral trading system can provide a platform for economic



recovery but in order to remain efficient, the rules of 1995 need to be updated. This is what was decided in 2001, when this current round of trade talks was launched, and this is what we are working towards today. The challenge now facing us is to start weaving all strings of the negotiations into an overall package.

There is no doubt that trade negotiations are a vital part of our work. Yet, the WTO is about much more than negotiations. This was confirmed at our Seventh Ministerial Conference, which took place in Geneva at the end of last year. During the two and a half days of the conference, ministers focused on the entire spectrum of WTO activities, trading thoughts and ideas on how we can make our organization more vibrant, efficient and effective.

One of the topics for discussion was how to make our trading system as transparent as possible. For the system to work effectively, governments need to notify partners of changes to their trade policies and to provide data in a timely fashion. The WTO's trade policy review process plays an important role in monitoring this. During the year we also published four reports on how the economic crisis has affected trade policies. These reports have allowed governments to gain a clear view of what others are doing while underscoring that their own actions will be made known to all.

The resolution of commercial disputes between nations is another important aspect of WTO work. In 2009 we reached the milestone of having the 400th case brought before the WTO's dispute settlement body. This is surely a vote of confidence in a system which many consider to be a role model for the peaceful resolution of disputes in other areas of international political or economic relations.

Capacity-building was another important topic discussed at the Ministerial Conference. Many developing countries require greater productive capacity, transport, energy and communications infrastructure, and training to help producers exploit new export opportunities. During the conference, ministers confirmed their commitment to the Aid for Trade initiative, with many countries pledging to increase their contributions.

The international commitment to help developing countries was also confirmed at the Second Global Review of Aid for Trade, which took place here at the WTO in July of last year. I had the pleasure of welcoming my counterparts from the international financial institutions and other international organizations as well as ministers and trade practitioners to assess the success of the initiative to date and what we need to do next. These priorities include strengthening the regional dimension of Aid for Trade, enhancing the role of the private sector and evaluating in a better way the impact of Aid for Trade on the ground. So far so good. But as we prepare for the UN Millennium Development Goals Summit in September this year, we need to maintain the momentum in resources beyond 2010.

It was also a great pleasure for me to open the doors of the WTO to the public in 2009 for the first time ever. Our Open Day attracted over 5,000 visitors who took the opportunity to find out more about what we do and to take a look around our lakeside home.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to say how pleased I am to have been asked by WTO members to serve for a second four-year term as Director-General of this institution. It is both an honour and a privilege to serve at the helm of the WTO at such a demanding time and I look forward to working with the membership and our high-quality Secretariat to meet the challenges that lie ahead.



Pascal Lamy
Director-General

Events of 2009

January

Director-General attends World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

March

WTO launches Chairs Programme for academic institutions in developing countries.

April

David Walker of New Zealand is appointed new Chair of Agriculture Negotiations Group.

WTO launches annual Essay Award for Young Economists.

General Council unanimously agrees to reappoint Pascal Lamy for second term of four years, starting in September.

May

Second Regional Review of Aid for Trade takes place in Montego Bay, Jamaica.

General Council agrees to hold Seventh Ministerial Conference in Geneva from 30 November to 2 December 2009.

June

WTO and UNEP Secretariats publish new report on trade and climate change.

July

Second Global Review of Aid for Trade takes place in Geneva.

September

WTO holds first Open Day, welcoming some 5,000 visitors.

WTO Public Forum 2009 takes place in Geneva.

October

General Council elects Andrés Velasco of Chile as Chair of Seventh Ministerial Conference.

November

400th trade dispute brought to WTO's dispute settlement mechanism.

Seventh Ministerial Conference takes place in Geneva (30 November to 2 December).

December

DG hails accord ending long-running banana dispute.

Ministerial Conference

November/December 2009

Following a gap of several years, WTO members agreed in May 2009 that the Seventh Ministerial Conference would take place in Geneva from 30 November to 2 December 2009. Ministers met against the backdrop of the financial and economic crisis to reaffirm the value of the rules-based multilateral trading system.

In deciding to hold the conference, WTO members agreed to make it a discussion forum rather than a negotiating marathon. It would not be aimed at resolving the outstanding issues in the Doha negotiations. They also agreed to make it shorter than previous conferences – just two and a half days – and to hold it in Geneva. It was attended by nearly 3,000 delegates representing all 153 members as well as 56 observers.

The work of the conference ran on two tracks: plenary sessions, at which ministers made formal speeches, and working sessions, where more informal discussions were held. An overall theme for the conference – ‘The WTO, the Multilateral Trading System and the Current Global Economic Environment’ – provided a broad context for the formal speeches. The interactive working sessions addressed two sub-themes – ‘Review of WTO activities, including the Doha Work Programme’ and ‘The WTO’s contribution to recovery, growth and development’.

Although the conference was not designed for negotiations, almost all ministers said they wanted the Doha Round talks to achieve an agreement soon. ‘Ministers reaffirmed the need to conclude the Round in 2010 and for a stocktaking exercise to take place in the first quarter of next year’, the Chair of the Conference, Chilean Finance Minister Andrés Velasco, said in his summary of the discussions. Many members described a swift conclusion to the Round as an essential stimulus package making no call on government budgets and providing a further insurance policy against protectionism.

Another reason to conclude the Round quickly, in the view of some, was the need for the WTO to move on to newer issues, such as climate change. A number, from both developed and developing countries,

also called for stronger Aid for Trade (see page 112) and related activities to help developing countries adjust to economic circumstances and benefit from the Doha Round’s outcome.

Many speakers welcomed the WTO Secretariat’s recent series of reports monitoring governments’ trade measures during the crisis (see page 74), which they said was useful both as a means of making information available and for countries to exercise peer pressure on each other to avoid damaging protectionist reactions. The reports show that ‘the system has held fast’, one minister said.

Other topics raised by ministers included issues facing the least-developed countries, the growing number of bilateral and regional trade agreements, the need to speed up membership negotiations and make them more transparent, and increasing dialogue with civil society.

It was decided in advance that there would be no outcome document negotiated among members, only a summing up by the Chair. Mr Velasco said ministers had recognized the crucial role of the rules-based multilateral trading system in mitigating the effects of the crisis, and had focused on what the WTO could do to assist economic recovery. The WTO needed to emerge strengthened from the crisis.

At the end of the conference, WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy said: ‘Our objective remains to open trade for the benefit of all. The desire expressed by ministers to conclude the Doha Round quickly had provided the “political energy” needed to close the remaining gaps. This remained the first priority and the litmus test of members’ commitment to the WTO.’

See also p. 30.

Our objective remains to open trade for the benefit of all.

