



WORLD TRADE
ORGANIZATION



WTO
CHAIRS
PROGRAMME

Meeting Phase III WTO Chairs

Opening Remarks by Senior Advisor to the Director-General, Ambassador Stephen
Fevrier

17 February 2021 via Teams
2.00 – 4.00 pm CET (Geneva)

Introduction

Distinguished professors and advisory board members, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to convey to you, the warm greetings of the Director General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Dr Ngozi OKONJO-IWEALA, and to welcome the new Chairs.

Dr Ngozi is convinced that the Chairs programme has a great role to play in ensuring inclusiveness and active participation of developing and least-developed countries in the multilateral system. Dr Ngozi has personally reviewed the selection process for phase III and she has decided to make the WCP a rolling programme.

You have invested quite a bit of time and energy in applying to the programme and laying out ambitious plans for the coming years. Now that these efforts have led to your participation in this very important programme, I hope you are as excited as we are to get started.

It is indeed an exciting time to be a WTO Chair. Since its launch in 2010, the Chairs Programme has grown in size and reputation. More importantly, you, the incoming Chairs, take up your positions at a difficult time, when the international community is facing challenges it has never faced before. Trade and trade governance are changing in the age of the pandemic, climate change and accelerating digital evolution. It is perhaps more important than ever that academics like yourselves help prepare governments and future generations of trade practitioners to navigate these changes.

Challenges and Opportunities of Running This Programme in COVID-19 pandemic context

Over the course of today and the next few sessions, you will be discussing how best to deliver on the goals of the WCP, going into detail on each of the three pillars: research, curriculum development, and outreach to policy makers, with the help of our experienced chairs and advisory board members.

But of course, the pandemic not only impacts *what* you will research, teach and discuss, but also *how*. Ordinarily, we would all be gathering in person at the WTO. Hopefully, in the not-too-distant future this will be possible again and I look forward to welcoming you here and meeting you all in person. The secretariat is considering June as the time for an annual meeting of the Chairs programme, but this requires coordination with the new date of MC12 which is not yet set.

Today however we are faced with the challenge of working together almost exclusively in virtual mode. Although there is no substitute to the interpersonal relationships we can develop when exchanging face-to-face, this new reality also provides important opportunities.

A virtual network will allow us to be more inclusive and flexible. Collaborations can begin on short notice, and without debilitating financial or logistical limitations. The advent of distance-learning provides the chance to rethink pedagogical approaches, syllabi and teaching formats. The shift from Brownbag lunches to Webinars comes with its own set of unique opportunities. Outreach events in this day and age can be bigger, attract a broader audience and include a wider set of speakers and issues than in previous phases of the WCP.

The way we maintain the network that you are now a part of is also changing, as evidenced by the format of our meeting today. We will have to rely on one another to find solutions to the limitations brought about by the pandemic. This is especially true as the strength of the WTO Chairs programme is in its network. You, the incoming chairs, are joining a set of esteemed academics, reinforced by incredibly experienced and knowledgeable advisory board members and supported by a dedicated staff here at the WCP Section of the WTO Knowledge Management Division, under the able stewardship of Director Werner Zdouc.

I am confident that we will all successfully adapt to the reality in which we now share and work together in this network, and that together we will be able to deliver on the goals of this programme. I wish you all a lot of success and look forward to following the work you take up together.

I thank you.