

Spotlight:

Buenos Aires Ministerial Conference



At the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC11), held in Buenos Aires on 10-13 December 2017, ministers adopted decisions on fisheries subsidies, e-commerce, small economies and intellectual property and established a working party on the accession of South Sudan. Substantive progress was not possible in other areas under discussion. The MC11 Chair noted that WTO members agreed to advance negotiations on all remaining issues.

The opening ceremony saw a strong show of political support for the WTO and the multilateral trading system. The presidents of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay emphasized the role of trade in growth and development and the importance of promoting a more inclusive multilateral trading system. The President of Chile addressed the conference in a video message.

The four presidents, together with representatives of Chile, Colombia, Guyana, Mexico, Peru and Suriname, signed a presidential declaration reaffirming their support for multilateralism and the importance of preserving and strengthening the multilateral trading system. They invited other members wishing to join the declaration to do so.

In Buenos Aires, informal meetings open to all WTO members were held in a number of areas in parallel to the formal plenary sessions. Members, with the help of five ministerial facilitators (see page 45), worked hard to try to narrow their differences. In the end, agreement could not be reached in many of the areas under discussion but the conference ended with a decision on fisheries subsidies and on a number of other areas (see box).

Ministerial decisions

Fisheries subsidies

Ministers agreed on a work programme, with a view to adopting an agreement on fisheries subsidies disciplines by the next Ministerial Conference in 2019 (see page 57).

E-commerce

Ministers agreed to seek to “reinvigorate” work under the 1998 E-commerce Work Programme and extended the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions until the next Ministerial Conference (see page 63).

TRIPS non-violation and situation complaints

Ministers agreed to extend the moratorium on “non-violation and situation” complaints in intellectual property until the next Ministerial Conference. They directed the TRIPS Council to continue its examination of the scope and modalities for these complaints and to make recommendations to the next Conference (see page 102).

Work Programme on Small Economies

Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the Work Programme and instructed the WTO Secretariat to continue its work on the challenges that small economies experience in their efforts to reduce trade costs (see page 150).

South Sudan

Ministers agreed to start WTO membership talks for South Sudan and established a working party to examine the country’s application (see page 36).





Next steps

At the closing session, the MC11 Chair, Minister Susana Malcorra of Argentina, noted the strong commitment to “advance negotiations on all remaining issues, including on the three pillars of agriculture – namely domestic support, market access and export competition – as well as non-agricultural market access, services, development, TRIPS, rules, and trade and environment”.

Director-General Azevêdo said that in Buenos Aires, members had sowed the seed of an organization which could work better – an organization that could be vibrant, flexible and nimble. But for that to happen, all of them had to believe in that vision.

Joint statements by groups of members

At the end of the Conference, four joint statements were signed by like-minded groups of members on advancing discussions on e-commerce, investment facilitation for development, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and trade and women's economic empowerment. These members encouraged all WTO members to join them.

Seventy-one members agreed to initiate exploratory work together towards future negotiations on trade-related aspects of e-commerce. Participation would be open to all WTO members and would be without prejudice to participants' positions on future negotiations. A first meeting was held in the first quarter of 2018.

Recognizing the links between investment, trade and development, 70 WTO members agreed to pursue structured discussions aimed at developing a multilateral framework on investment facilitation. The proponents met in early 2018.

On MSMEs, 87 WTO members declared their intention to create an Informal Working Group on MSMEs at the WTO that is open to all members. They agreed to continue striving for a multilateral outcome aimed at establishing a formal work programme for MSMEs at the next Ministerial Conference. The discussions will address the obstacles MSMEs face in participating in international trade.

A total of 118 WTO members and observers supported the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment aimed at increasing the participation of women in trade (see page 108).

In addition, a group of 60 WTO members issued a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to advancing the ongoing talks on domestic regulation in services and calling on all members to intensify work, with the aim of concluding the negotiations before the next Ministerial Conference.

Side events

A Business Forum organized on the sidelines of MC11 ended with the International Chamber of Commerce issuing a statement with recommendations on the direction of the world trade agenda (see page 174). To drive dialogue on e-commerce, a new initiative was launched by the WTO, the World Economic Forum and the Electronic World Trade Platform (see page 175).

Attendance

The Ministerial Conference, the first to be held in South America, was attended by about 4,500 participants.