



***Fourth China Round Table***  
***WTO Accession and Domestic Reforms***

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**10:00 – 11:30**

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### **Salutations**

1. H. E. Mrs. Amina Mohamed, Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kenya;
2. H. E. Saidrahmon Nazriev, First Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade, Tajikistan;
3. Mr. David Shark, Deputy Director-General, WTO;
4. Fellow Panelists;
5. Representatives of the WTO Secretariat;
6. Excellencies;
7. Colleagues, Friends of Liberia, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

### **Introduction**

8. I am yet again honoured to be here today with you all once again to contribute to the discussions on the first day of the Fourth China Round Table. I participated in the Second China Round Table in Laos PDR and see these events, as the way to always improve and update the literature relating to the multilateral trading system;
9. I am fortunate and quite grateful to my team, and all the talented technicians with us here today and those back home in Liberia, who has steadfastly worked to get Liberia's accession to its conclusion.
10. I am particularly honoured to have my President to be in Kenya for the Tenth WTO Ministerial. It has been a week of high-level activities for my delegation, as our President, H.E. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has just concluded a State Visit to Kenya, upon the invitation of H.E. Uhuru Kenyatta.
11. Colleagues, friends, on behalf of Her Excellency, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia and the people of Liberia, let me also use this occasion to thank all of you for your support, leadership, and flexibility in getting Liberia's accession to its conclusion.

### **Liberia's WTO Accession Story**

12. It all began in 2007, when a seasoned UN expert, then Minister of Commerce and Industry in Liberia, affixed her signature to a letter requesting membership for Liberia with the World Trade Organization.



13. It took four years for Liberia to submit its Memorandum of Foreign Trade Regime-MFTR under the authority of another Commerce Minister.
14. Domestic structures were put in place to facilitate the accession. Liberia organized a two-tier structure (Trade Policy Committee and the WTO Technical Working Group) supported by focal groups on Goods and Services.
15. The First Meeting of the Working Party was held in July 2012 and there was no subsequent meeting, until a new lease of life and momentum was brought to the accession process through a commanding instruction from the President, H.E. Madam Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf requesting an early harvest of the accession process by December 2015.
16. In May 2014, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in a letter to the Director General of the WTO, Roberto Azevedo, expressed Liberia's need of assistance to fast track its accession process in time for MC10. She also appointed the Minister of Commerce as the Chief Negotiator.
17. Additional technical work "steamed" with the support of SIDA/NBT, ITC, UNCTAD, ACWL, World Bank, EIF, and King and Spalding Law Firm. Subsequently, Liberia's WTO Market Access Package tabling its offers was submitted in October of 2014 during the heat of the Ebola crisis – an effort that was heavily hinged on the domestic technical team with online support from NBT, ITC and the WTO Secretariat.

### **The Link to Domestic Reforms**

18. What the President's letter did was not only to communicate Liberia's seriousness to accede to the WTO, but it also pinned the accession to the five-year development plan, Agenda for Transformation, the Government of Liberia is implementing.
19. The objectives of accession were obvious: Liberia needs to become competitiveness and that can only happen through domestic reforms that improve import conditions for exporting or importing products (SPS and TBT); setting up the National Standards Board; going through the process of ISO accreditation for the National Standards Laboratory; continuously improving licensing procedures; streamlining procedures at border posts to enhance trading across borders; and diversifying the economy from a more extractive growth-driven to a services economy.
20. Several meetings were scheduled as per the comprehensive accession roadmap to fast track the Accession for 2015. However, despite the submission of the negotiation package in October 2014, the unanticipated intervening health crisis compelled the putting off the working meetings until January 2015.
21. Liberia sees the WTO accession as a process that provides an acceding government with a powerful instrument for domestic reforms to accelerate growth, strengthen institutional capacity and, where necessary, draft or update legislations that bring the



key segments of trade (TRIPS, Agriculture, SPS, TBT, Competition, etc.) into conformity with the WTO principles and rules.

22. The Government also notes that, as a post-conflict LDC, Liberia was in a fantastic position to use the accession, as one of the domestic reforms, to emerge from the trinity of conflict, health crisis and youth unemployment.
23. Therefore, during the negotiations, we took careful consideration of Liberia's redlines. We identified the redlines and put them on the table at an early stage of the negotiations. With the appropriate technical assistance, Liberia was able to negotiate those redlines in its Market Access Package on Goods and Services, as well as the other negotiation inputs on subsidies, TRIPS, TBT and SPS.
24. During the accession, we realized that we would be obligated to some WTO commitments. WTO commitments are legally binding; and they help improve investors' confidence and the domestic environment for doing business.
25. The World Bank, as well as, the International Growth Center conducted impact studies to approximate the maximum benefits of Liberia's accession to the WTO. Their general conclusion was that WTO accession would yield institutional and legal reforms that would spur growth. These conclusions were also realized at an early stage of the accession process.
26. However, amid all these findings, there was a gap between the Government's aspirations and the amount of work that has to be done to fast track the accession. We had already sourced technical assistance from the Swedes (Sida/NBT), ITC, UNCTAD and the International Senior Lawyers Project (ISLP). We expanded on the existing TA with additional support from King and Spalding Law Firm, as well as, a real-time support from the WTO Secretariat.
27. During the recent health crisis, Liberia realized that WTO accession was also an opportunity to open up the health sector and woo private sector investment in health services.
28. Similar private sector investment is being sought in educational services, which was heavily impacted during the civil crisis. As link to domestic reforms, Liberia's services offer presents these sectors as attractive investment pitches for private sector investment.
29. Liberia has also liberalized its financial and telecommunications services to the extend that banks provided competitive lender rates and other lending opportunities for market women and youths.
30. Telecommunication operators provide mobile internet services that facilitate learning for students; that provide improved market intelligence for farmers; and streamline the ease of doing business; especially, through the mobile money.



31. Liberia Post Accession Plan builds on some of these existing interventions and provides the opportunities to introduce the Single Window Platform for the automation of trade processes and procedures; diversify the economy; and build the infrastructure for trade competitiveness.

### **The Give-and-Take Accession**

32. WTO accession is a painstaking and, sometimes, difficult process, especially for LDCs. The documentation requirements can not be done without the relevant studies, analyses or technical preparation.
33. Acceding countries have to also consider the financial implications, which may require temporary assignment of technicians overseas; support for capacity building; and a strong urge for policy makers to commit to the process across the government.
34. The bilateral track is a detailed, yet, painstaking process. Why?
  - 1) There are Members whose interests may be in obtaining “Initial Negotiating Rights” for specific tariff lines.
  - 2) There are those who may request that the applied and bound rates are the same for specific products.
  - 3) There are those who are interested in reducing the bound rates for specific products.
  - 4) There may also be request to deepen the commitments in services sectors and sub-sectors or even liberalize some sectors.
35. LDCs must learn to negotiate in a way that their national sensitivities are identified and presented as early as possible in the negotiations. This way, the negotiation becomes a give-and-take one.
36. LDCs should also learn to get Members’ commitments to provide support for a post-accession plan that supports poverty reduction and growth, as well as, deeper integration in the global economy

### **Conclusion**

37. WTO accession process provides a unique opportunity, particularly as the UN has identified a new set of development goals: Sustainable Development Goals.
38. Liberia’s Accession provides a unique opportunity to show the power of trade for poverty reduction; to show that development is not sustainable without trade; to show that trade can trigger economic transformation that is inclusive and sustainable; and, with the right support, the right reforms, the right innovations, we can transform lives using companion policies that support trade.
39. It is important to build capacity within the private sector and keep them informed about the accession process.



40. Implementing and living up to all WTO commitments is no “quick-fix” and will require continued and long-term commitments from the Liberian government and its developing partners.
41. WTO-membership is a long-term commitment and some benefits are likely to be realized in the medium and long term. WTO accession works best when it is supported by the relevant companion policies.
42. Liberia wants to be a part of the multilateral trading system and we will continue to demonstrate that belief in the rules and principles governing the WTO even after accession.
43. Thank you.