

# FUTURE OF LDC ACCESSIONS (HIGH-LEVEL OPENING SESSION)

TENTH CHINA ROUND TABLE ON WTO ACCESSIONS

TUESDAY, 18 JANUARY 2022, 12:00-12:30, VIRTUAL, ZOOM

## Potential remarks

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome! We are here today to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the China's Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) and Accessions Programme (the 'China Programme'). This comes soon after we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of China's WTO membership last month.

Let me start by thanking the Government of China for this programme, the only one of its kind dedicated to Accessions. Accessions and LDCs are two critical tests of the multilateral trading system's ability to bring marginalized countries and people into the mainstream of global trade. On both fronts, the China Programme has brought tangible benefits and visibility.

On behalf of all Secretariat divisions that have been involved in the implementation of the Programme, I would like to express our deep appreciation for the productive collaboration we have enjoyed with the

Ministry of Commerce, and especially the Chinese Mission here in Geneva.

## **KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CHINA PROGRAMME**

The Secretariat has made a brochure highlighting key activities under the China Programme over the last 10 years. Let me point to a few.

The annual China Round Tables on accession have become the annual "rendez-vous" for accession negotiators, serving as a platform to share experiences and lessons. They have become a valuable informal venue for Article XII members to look at post-accession challenges, and for acceding countries to engage with Members to try to unblock their accession negotiations. Organising the Round Table on the margins of Ministerial Conferences has helped draw Members' attention to accession and post-accession issues, especially for LDCs.

In terms of capacity-building, the 10-month Accessions Internship Programme has been an important contribution from the China Programme, and a valuable complement to the WTO's existing internship programmes. 39 young professionals from more than 25 developing and

least developed countries, many from acceding countries and Article XII Members, have worked directly in the Accessions Division of the WTO Secretariat. I am told many of them went back home and joined their government's WTO team, often working to advance their own countries' accession processes. This attests to how the programme directly strengthens countries' accession capacity, but also has longer-term impacts by fostering skills and connections among young trade professionals who understand the multilateral trade system.

The China Programme also supports LDCs to participate more effectively in the multilateral trading system. 31 activities have been supported to increase LDC participation in WTO meetings, about half on work relating to cotton. South-South dialogues help LDCs coordinate positions and reach out to partners to advance topics of mutual interest. I had the pleasure to attend such a dialogue last September, where I shared views on how the WTO and MC12 could help LDCs use trade to address vaccine inequity, drive their economic recoveries from the pandemic, and foster deeper integration into regional and global value chains. The final pillar of these activities are workshops the Secretariat has organized for several LDCs to disseminate key findings from Trade Policy Reviews, discuss possible trade reforms, and identify trade-related capacity building needs.

## REFLECTIONS ON LDC ACCESSIONS

Two months ago, I met with representatives from all acceding governments, and spelled out some thoughts on past accessions and potential approaches for attempting to unlock stalled accession negotiations. Today, I will focus on LDC accessions.

Since its establishment in 1995, the WTO has welcomed 36 new members, including nine LDCs. That said, it took until 2004 for the first two LDCs to join the organization – Nepal and Cambodia, after nearly 15 and 10 years of negotiations, respectively. Cabo Verde concluded its accession talks as an LDC but had graduated from that status by the time it joined in 2008. Samoa and Vanuatu acceded in 2012; Lao PDR in 2013; Yemen in 2014; and Liberia and Afghanistan in 2016. It may be a coincidence, but I would like to think that along with the 2002 and 2012 Guidelines on LDCs' Accession, the establishment of the China Programme in 2011 has had a positive impact here.

Today, 8 of the 23 ongoing accessions are LDCs, namely Bhutan, Comoros, Ethiopia, Sao Tomé & Príncipe, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan

and Timor-Leste. Despite the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these processes are making good progress. In fact, over the last 24 months, all but one of the active Working Parties on accessions have been for LDCs.<sup>1</sup> One of the most advanced accessions today is an LDC i.e., the Comoros.

In this context, let me welcome the study prepared for this Roundtable, which will be discussed in tomorrow's session. The study provides a practical set of recommendations on "pre-accession, negotiations and post-accession" for acceding LDCs, based on the lessons learned from the nine LDC accessions. These deal with steps such as the development of an accession strategy, the appointment of a Chief Negotiator, the establishment of a negotiating team, capacity building, the role of the Geneva mission, the preparation of market access offers, consultations process with domestic stakeholders, public outreach, and so on.

I want to thank former WTO Chief Economist Patrick Low and former accession Chief Negotiator for Afghanistan Mozammil Shinwari for this study, as well as former Chief Negotiator for Liberia Axel Addy who will be

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<sup>1</sup> Since January 2020, the following LDCs have held Working Party meetings: Comoros (September 2020 and September 2021), Ethiopia (January 2020), Sudan (March and July 2021) and Timor-Leste (October 2020 and July 2021), while only one non-LDC i.e. Uzbekistan, held a WP meeting in July 2020.

moderating the session tomorrow to add his insights and advice. I believe that the session will be useful for acceding LDCs, as well as LDCs that are already WTO members.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study and this China Round Table are timely, as the international community prepares for the 5<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on LDCs (LDC-V), which was initially scheduled to take place next week in Qatar, but has been postponed. The outcomes of the discussions of this event, will also serve as inputs to my first Annual Report on WTO Accessions, which I will present to the General Council next month.

Looking ahead, the accession of Comoros can be finalised this year. Other LDC accessions will demand more concerted efforts, domestically and internationally, backed by capacity support, to use the process to drive economic reforms, and promote peace and stability. This is particularly relevant for the 11 fragile and conflict-affected countries in the current accession list and many of them are LDCs. The report issued by the World Bank last week warned that while the world economy will be on

a post-COVID recovery path starting this year, output among fragile, conflict-affected states will be 7.5 to 8.5 per cent below its pre-pandemic level.<sup>2</sup> This is alarming.

In closing, I want to commend the g7+ WTO Accessions Group of fragile and conflict affected LDCs for bringing "peace" – the fundamental reason for the creation of the multilateral trading system – back into the trade debate. I believe that the Group's efforts in bringing the special challenges faced by fragile and conflict-affected states to the attention of the WTO membership, will contribute to a more inclusive multilateral trading system.

I will stop here, and say simply that I look forward to the discussion.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank Global Economic Prospect 2022:  
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/36519/9781464817601.pdf#page39>