



THIRD REGIONAL DIALOGUE ON WTO ACCESSIONS FOR AFRICA

HIGH LEVEL OPENING SESSION: AFRICA AND THE MULTILATERAL TRADING SYSTEM

IN HONOUR OF AMBASSADOR CHIEDU OSAKWE (1955 -2019)

OPENING STATEMENT

Wednesday, 12 February 2020

*Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. Good morning. On behalf of the WTO, I would like to extend a warm welcome to all participants of the Third Regional Dialogue on WTO Accessions for Africa.
2. Today's event is the result of a true partnership and collaboration with several institutions. I would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the African Union Commission, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the International Trade Centre, and the World Bank Group for joining hands with the WTO to make this event possible. My special appreciation also goes to the Government of Ethiopia for hosting this Dialogue and for giving us such a warm and graceful welcome.
3. WTO accessions are a rigorous process. Nine (9) African countries constitute 40% of the candidates in the current queue for accession. During the last 25 years, out of the 36 accession candidates which successfully obtained WTO membership, there were only three African countries - Cabo Verde in 2008, Seychelles in 2015 and Liberia in 2016. Therefore, we still have some more work to do here in Africa, which remains our priority. In the continent, the Horn of Africa has the highest concentration of accession activities.
4. Against this background, it was Kenya that came up with the idea of holding an accession activity focused in the Horn and hosted the first Regional Dialogue on WTO Accessions in Nairobi in August 2017. This was

an instant hit as it allowed African acceding governments to share their experiences, learn from their peers as well as from those who went through the WTO accession process before them. Then, the Regional Dialogue was carried by Djibouti – another WTO member from the Horn – to host the second one in December 2018, highlighting the "Trade for Peace" efforts of the sub-region.

5. This time, the Regional Dialogue is being hosted by Ethiopia, for the first time by an acceding government. And the participation has been extended to all African acceding governments. I see this as a real ownership of this platform by the African acceding governments. Today, I am pleased to see **seven** acceding governments present, namely, Algeria, Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan. Also, I am pleased to see private sector representatives, sitting side by side, with government officials, as they have a lot of stake in the accession exercise which is essentially to improve the business environment.

6. Let me say how significant the work which your governments are undertaking to pursue WTO membership is giving inspiration to and helping to shape up the Multilateral Trading System which is going through a critical period. This year, the WTO celebrates its 25th anniversary. New headlines are not always positive nor encouraging, as some cast doubt on the relevance or attempt to paralyze key function of the system. But at the same time, Members are seriously embarking on WTO Reform debate to improve the functioning of the system. What I see is that most often, acceding governments can appreciate far better the value which the system can offer them and do for them. Let me quote what the Chief Negotiator, Mr Mamo, said two weeks ago, as Ethiopia's Working Party resumed after eight years of dormancy.

"At a time when the relevance of the WTO is being questioned from different corners, Ethiopia is here today because it is convinced that, despite its weaknesses and imperfections – of which there many – there is no better way to advance free and fair trade than through a multilateral trading system based on the rule of law, transparency, good governance, and predictability.

Just as the WTO aims to advance peace and stability through trade, the Government of Ethiopia is committed to use trade and regional integration as the central pillar for its mission to bring peace and stability to the Horn of Africa region."

7. This is why I have often said that acceding governments are in the vanguard of WTO reform. They have long made systemic contributions to the international trading system, with accession commitments stimulating rule-making discussions at the multilateral level. One accession negotiator from a large WTO member has recently said: "Accession is what we (Members) want the WTO to be ideally". Despite the difficulties and

challenges which you as acceding governments may face at home or with Members during the accession process, please always remember that your contributions are making the multilateral trading system stronger, more relevant and more inclusive, as you help to improve your own rates of economic progress.

8. Today's high-level session, on 'Africa and the Multilateral Trading System', is befittingly in honour of Ambassador Chiedu Osakwe – a man who was a firm believer in the value of economic integration and a tireless advocate for WTO membership. As many said at his memorial services held on 25 November 2019 after his untimely passing last September, Chiedu brought Africa to the WTO and he also brought the WTO to Africa.

9. Chiedu served in the WTO Secretariat from 1998 to 2016, following his 19-year diplomatic career in the Nigerian Foreign Service. He was one of the first Africans who joined the Secretariat, having covered the conclusion of the Uruguay Round as a Nigerian delegate to the GATT. In the WTO Secretariat, he worked closely with the Director-Generals, including Mr Renato Ruggiero, Mr Mike Moore, Mr Supachai Panitchpakdi, Mr Pascal Lamy and Mr Roberto Azevêdo, while holding senior positions in the Development Division, the Office of the Director-General, Technical Cooperation Division, Textiles Division, DDA Special Duties Division, before taking over the Accessions Division in 2009.

10. During his 7-year as Director of the Accessions Division, Chiedu managed a number of accessions including several of yours in this room and I know that many of you worked with him. As an African, he wanted to see more African countries in the WTO. And he did just that – two of the three African accessions - Seychelles and Liberia were concluded under his time, in 2015 and 2016, respectively. In addition, he oversaw the accessions of five more LDC accessions (Samoa and Vanuatu in 2012, Lao PDR in 2013, Yemen in 2014 and Afghanistan in 2016, in addition to Liberia), as well as the most systematically complex accessions of the Russian Federation (2012) and Kazakhstan (2015), as well as Montenegro (2012) and Tajikistan (2013).

11. When he left the WTO Secretariat, he became Nigeria's Chief Trade Negotiator and the Director-General of the Nigerian Office for Trade Negotiations and led the Negotiating Forum as Chair to the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in March 2018. After Geneva, Addis essentially became his most frequent travel destination. This is the reason why we thought that this was the right place to discuss this topic – Africa and the Multilateral Trading System - in addition to African accessions, with friends and colleagues who worked very closely with Chiedu in different capacities. I am sure Chiedu would be eagerly listening to this debate from where he is.

12. This morning's High-Level session will examine three different issues:

1. WTO Membership and the Implementation of the AfCFTA;
2. WTO Reform and the Future of African Trade Policy; and
3. WTO Accession and Africa - Opportunities, Challenges and Support.

13. The first topic we will be discussing is **"WTO Membership and the AfCFTA Implementation"**. All African Members (44) and Observers (9) of the WTO are signatories to the AfCFTA. The implementation of the AfCFTA is set to start on the 1st of July this year. As African countries are getting ready to implement the AfCFTA, fundamental questions come to mind. What will be the relationship between the AfCFTA and the WTO? In what ways can WTO Membership and the AfCFTA complement each other? How can the WTO support the implementation of the AfCFTA? I will leave it up to our distinguished panellists to shed light on these fundamental questions.

14. The second part of the session will focus on **"WTO Reform and the future of African Trade Policy"**. The multilateral trading system as we know it is facing unprecedented challenges, and some may even say a crisis. This "crisis" however, generated talks about reforming the system, which is essential for any system to stay relevant. WTO Members are now working towards achieving concrete outcomes at the 12th Ministerial Conference in June 2020 while African countries will be implementing the AfCFTA in July 2020. Both of these activities will shape the future of African Trade Policy. Let's hear our speakers' perspectives on the interactions between WTO reform and the future of African Trade Policy.

15. The third part of our discussion is on **"WTO Accession and Africa - Opportunities, Challenges and Support"**. As mentioned earlier, Africa constitutes 40% of the current set of acceding governments. Out of the 22 acceding governments, nine are from the African continent. While the benefits of WTO accession are expansive, the process is rigorous, particularly for Least developed countries. Despite this difficulty, 36 countries joined the WTO since its creation, including three from the African Continent. These are: Cape Verde in 2008, Seychelles in 2015, and Liberia in 2016.

16. With these remarks, I look forward to listening to our prominent speakers at this high-level session. Thank you.
