

11th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation

Statement delivered by H. E. Sigrid Kaag, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of The Netherlands

Excellencies,

I would like to our host Argentina, and the Chair of the Ministerial Conference, for their gracious hosting and inspiring work on the occasion of the 11th Ministerial Conference of the WTO.

Can trade make the world a more prosperous place? Can it make the world safer? Can it lift people out of poverty? As Minister for Foreign Trade and Development in a liberal country, my answer will not surprise you. Yes, under the right circumstances. Yes, provided the rules are clear and respected by all. Yes, provided business is conducted in a sustainable way that respects the environment. Yes, provided it does not cause discrimination against women and minorities. The Netherlands is a country of trade and business people. The Dutch economy mostly grew thanks to trade and innovation. Wealth is created by exporting goods and services, and in order to make trade work for us all we need level playing fields.

We are gathered here to improve the rules that guide trade flows.

It is no easy task: the global rules-based system continues to face criticism, from both the street and from the political arena. Faith in the benefits of free trade is fading. Underneath lies a common denominator: a fear of lack of protection – for working people, for the environment, for poorer countries. Those concerns can be real, understandable and legitimate. The answer, however, is not an attack on the system or on this institution. The beginning of an answer can only be to reform the institutions for results. The WTO is not some anonymous, autonomous, astronomic Moloch. The WTO is a member driven organisation. In other words, those members who criticize it also have an obligation to propose viable alternatives. So what constitutes a sustainable, jobs-generating trading system in the 21st century? For the Netherlands, it contains at least four elements:

The Sustainable Development Goals. I consider them the true 'World Agenda' for the coming years. On trade, that agenda is clear: we will promote a universal rules-based open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system. And we need to significantly increase the

exports of developing countries. We should also dare to ask whether and how our trade system could work more towards inclusive development.

Secondly, we need to increase opportunities for women and girls in international trade. If you ask me, the case is simple: if women are not able to take advantage of business opportunities, we all lose. The gender and trade declaration that will be signed tomorrow is a necessary step towards making trade policy work towards equal opportunities.

Thirdly, we all need to work much harder on accountability. In the Netherlands, we often meet with NGOs, the private sector and labour unions to discuss our trade policy agenda. We need to show our constituents what the benefits of trade agreements are: in terms of jobs to be created, of wealth to be generated, of people to be lifted out of poverty.

Finally, the global trading system can only deliver benefits to all if national policies are aligned to achieve shared goals. For instance, we know that trade, like technology, can cause change and dislocation alongside economic transformation. National policies are essential to harness this process. In conclusion, we look forward to a reinvigorated WTO, its program of work and a pillar of our rules-based system. The Kingdom of the Netherlands will be a reliable partner in this endeavour.

Thank you.