

NATURAL DISASTERS AND TRADE SYMPOSIUM

10 May 2019

Room D

WELCOME REMARKS

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I am happy to welcome you all to this Third symposium on natural disasters and trade.

A warm welcome especially to those who have travelled from afar to be with us at today's meeting, particularly to His Excellency, Mr Felix, Minister of Commerce, Industry, Enterprise Development and Consumer Affairs of St Lucia, and the participants from Dominica, Nepal, Tonga and Vanuatu.

In my opening remarks, I will briefly recall the background to today's Symposium; make some general points on the nexus between natural disasters and trade; and conclude by explaining why this research matters and is indeed timely.

Background

Members will recall that the catalyst for this research work was the devastation suffered by the Eastern Caribbean in 2017. The damage inflicted by the passage of Hurricanes Irma and Maria became the subject of discussion, both in the General Council and at the last WTO Ministerial Conference.

This discussion brought to the fore a topic which has been with us for some time. In that regard, one would like to recall the 2004 tsunami and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. These events and an increasing number of others have been captured in Trade Policy Reviews.

What has been missing so far, however, is a systematic attempt to understand this nexus between natural disasters and trade. So, I wish to thank you, Ambassador Lisson, thank the Government of Australia for its support for us to undertake this important project.

As we will also hear from Jaime Chissano from the Mozambican Mission to the WTO, these events, regrettably, keep happening and inflicting a high-level human and economic costs.

Urbanization is a risk factor. Climate change risks are also making these events more frequent and severe. But before we throw up our hands in despair, let us think of the progress that has been made.

One message that we should take away from this research, published today, is that much more also need to be done to mitigate the economic and trade effects.

Nexus between natural disasters and trade

So, let me now make some general points about the nexus between natural disasters and trade.

The studies articulate the macroeconomic and trade impact of natural disasters. These are considerable, particularly when the economy concerned may be small and focused around a few key activities.

Second, trade issues clearly arise in the context of disaster response, recovery and efforts to reduce risk and promote resilience. Many of these issues are very familiar for trade negotiators and policy makers.

Let me give some examples that the research highlights:

- What measures should be applied when a disaster-affected Member's sanitary or phytosanitary status changes?
- How do we speed up the border clearance of goods?

- How best should we support farmers when faced with drought or flood damage?

In all these, what is new is not the issues, but rather the context in which we are framing them.

Why the research is both timely and matters

This leads me to my final point. Why this research is timely, and why it matters?

Next week, Kirsi Madi and her colleagues will convene the Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction here in Geneva from 15-18 May, 2019.

The focus of the event would be the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

The event will attract many participants; and discuss the *ex ante* action to reduce the social and economic burden of natural disasters.

I, therefore think that there is much that we can do from a trade perspective to contribute to this agenda. Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that we turn WTO into a disaster management agency. However, what I do think we can contribute is our understanding of how and why the trade issues we deal with on a day-to-day basis could matter in the context of dealing with, recovering from, or preparing for disasters. And here, past symposia have, I think, clearly highlighted that these events are either predictable or emanate from known risks.

In closing, my contention is that the research work is an aide-memoire. It can help us develop a road map towards a better management of the linkages between disasters and trade, including developing adequate and efficient risk assistance.

I wish you all a fruitful discussion.

Thank you.