

Roberto AZEVÊDO
Director-General

6 April 2020

Dear Members of Civil Society,

Thank you for your correspondence of 1 April and for the concerns and suggestions you presented therein. It is vital that, in these extraordinary circumstances, we hear and interact with all stakeholders with a view to finding the best possible way forward.

I would like to say at the outset that we are currently in unprecedented times given the emergency health situation. The WTO and other international organisations are working closely with one another and with national governments to do whatever we can, within our mandates, to help respond to the situation. The impact of the health crisis on developing countries is unquestionably a key part of our concern.

With regard to your specific requests about the future of the fisheries subsidies negotiations, it is important to understand that any action to halt or suspend negotiations is one that would need to be taken by WTO Members collectively. This is not something that is in the hands of myself or the Chair of the Fisheries negotiations, Ambassador Santiago Wills.

In this regard, the mandate given to WTO Members by their ministers at MC11 was to finalize the negotiations by the following Ministerial Conference which would have been MC12, in June this year, which was in line with the 2020 deadline in SDG target 14.6. As you are aware, however, that conference has been postponed by Members because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this, how the fisheries negotiations should proceed, just like several other ongoing issues at the WTO, will need to be discussed among WTO Members themselves and an appropriate course of action decided upon.

At the present time, and until Members can reach an understanding on the way forward, the Chair of the negotiations is doing what is necessary to keep Members apprised of the situation while seeking to continue the discussions under the mandate given to him from WTO Members. In this process, Ambassador Wills has been meticulous in keeping all delegations informed and taking into account the views of all delegations. Considering the difficulties faced by many Members in these challenging times, Ambassador Wills has sought a range of solutions which would enable Members to continue exchanging views and collectively looking for ways forward. No consolidated text has been issued, no final decisions have been taken and any such actions will only be taken after full consultations with and proper discussions among WTO Members.

Ambassador Wills understands as I do that all Members are in this process together and that the only way we can tackle the imminent threat to our oceans is for Members to do so jointly, and that we will now need to do this with the effects of the health crisis also in mind. Ambassador Wills will continue to be guided by the mandate which Members have given him, but both he and I will be listening to the views of all Members and taking decisions on the path forward for the negotiations accordingly.

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With regard to the modalities for holding meetings, this is an issue currently under consideration by myself and the Chair of the General Council and where there will need to be consultation with all WTO Members. No decisions have been taken yet, but, where possible, we are looking to find an acceptable path forward in a way that ensures transparency and inclusiveness for all Members, the bedrock of all work at the WTO. In this regard, concerns that may be advanced by any WTO member will continue to be taken into account fully.

Thank you for putting forward your views.

Yours sincerely,



Roberto Azevêdo

Members of Civil Society

cc: H.E. Mr Santiago Wills
Ambassador
Chair of the Fisheries Subsidies Negotiations
Permanent Mission of Colombia to the WTO