

Civil Society outreach at DG TRADE, European Commission

DG TRADE holds regular meetings with civil society organisations in the interests of transparency and better governance. The meetings include:

- *Regular updates on WTO topics, every two months or so;*
- *General meetings chaired by the commissioner(s), about three times a year;*
- *Ad hoc meetings on other negotiations, Sustainability Impact Assessments, and specific topics whenever needed.*

1 Why do we hold civil society meetings?

1.1 Benefits of structured dialogue

We want to create a confident working relationship between the Commission and civil society representatives. The political decision to do so is based on the realisation that there are many questions on which civil society organisations and the Commission do not see eye to eye. These can be clarified. Furthermore, civil society organisations include or work with experts in various fields who are able to flag relevant issues to which they are sensitive, as well as to provide expertise. They can make a significant contribution towards policy development. Regular, structured dialogue also provides ways and means for the Commission to improve its transparency and openness in an area of policy that has tended to be the preserve of specialists.

1.2 Learning from experience

The traditional way of making trade policy, in relatively discreet and low-key negotiations, aroused suspicion among many NGOs. They saw the process as undemocratic, not transparent, and biased towards the interests of big companies. Trade policy became the focal point of many civil society organisations' activities.

Two major events prompted the Commission to start outreach activities with the aim of demystifying both process and substance and starting a dialogue:

- Protests against the OECD negotiations on a multilateral agreement on investment (MAI) in 1998
- Protests in Seattle against the intended launch of a new round of trade negotiations during the WTO Ministerial Conference in 1999.

2 Who comes to meetings?

Over 600 organisations are registered on-line for our civil society dialogue activities. DG TRADE meetings are open to all not-for-profit stakeholders, not just NGOs. Employers' and trade union organisations are included, and MEPs as well as Member State representatives may attend. Organisations from new Member States are encouraged to join in. Return fares are reimbursed if necessary.

There are two types of meeting. Regular meetings track WTO affairs, the Doha Development Agenda and related issues. These are open to the not-for-profit organisations registered in our database. Ad hoc meetings may be opened to a wider group of stakeholders, depending on the topic, in which case they are advertised via EU TRADE NEWS.

3 How is the process organised?

3.1 Steering the process

A contact group representing all key groupings of organisations, selected by the organisations themselves, meets the Commission regularly to steer the process.

3.2 Participants may opt in

Not-for-profit organisations wishing to attend regular meetings can opt into the process by registering on-line with DG TRADE. Recipients of EU TRADE NEWS messages with notices of ad hoc meetings register for these meetings simply by responding with an e-mail.

4 Where are meetings held?

Usually in Brussels; and at WTO ministerials. At the Seattle WTO Ministerial (1999), the Commission included NGOs in its Delegation for the first time (without, however, giving them access to the negotiation rooms). This pattern was followed in Doha (2001), in Cancún (2003), and Hong Kong (2005) - 18 advisers in the delegation. DG TRADE also provides speakers for events organised by participants in our process, in Brussels and elsewhere.

5 Is civil society dialogue happening elsewhere too?

5.1 Within the Commission

Yes, each Directorate-General has its own activities, and the Secretariat General offers a focal point with its website setting out consultation standards and databases of consultative bodies within the Commission, as well as organisations organised at European level.

5.2 In Member States, major international organisations; other WTO members

Most EU Member States and all major international organisations (e.g. World Bank, WTO) now organise dialogue and/or consultation processes with civil society. Among other WTO members, the ministries of trade in Japan and Canada are among those which have contacted DG TRADE out of interest in its process while planning their own. DG TRADE aims to set an example with innovative activities and to encourage others to follow suit.

Eva Kaluzynska
European Commission Press Office, London
16.03.2006