



'WTO faces reputation collapse if fisheries deal fails'

Third Oceans Forum

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485 words

The World Trade Organization (WTO) has entered a new phase of negotiations that hopefully will lead to an agreement after 20 years on fishery subsidies, its ex-chair said today.

Roberto Zapata Barradas, former chair of the WTO negotiating group on rules, warned however that the WTO 12th Ministerial Conference at the end of this year would require only a small menu of proposals – “a handful in my view” – for them to take meaningful decisions.

By contrast, New Zealand, via its Deputy WTO Representative Thomas Haldon, warned that failure “will have consequences for the reputation of multilateral institutions [...] and of the WTO, which we can all agree has taken a hit.” Isabel Jarrett of The Pew Charitable Trust went even further. “The WTO is in a crisis,” she said.

Haldon pointed out that negotiations had been going on for two decades and were currently the only active WTO talks. “The time for excuses is over.”

He pointed out that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pledge countries to eliminate fisheries subsidies that create overfishing and encourage illegal fisheries through SDG14.6.

They were speaking at the Third Oceans Forum, part of the first UN Trade Forum organized by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva on 9-13 September.

The one-week Trade Forum is designed to feed into the UN climate summit. It is discussing overfishing, biotrade, and ocean plastics as well as trade in climate mitigation efforts.

Zapata noted that the WTO negotiators faced “inherent tensions” because of the hope for a “triple-win” of development, trade and environmental advantages from the talks. “Reconciling these three objectives is extremely hard,” he admitted. Sustainable development rather than trade distortion was outside the normal scope of the WTO’s typical focus.

A third major problem in reaching agreement is that negotiators were even more cautious because the agreement will be subject to WTO’s dispute settlement procedures.

However, he asserted that the group “has not slid back” over the past two years and has not become paralysed though its programme was advancing only “at a slow pace”. Negotiators had produced a score of papers since July, indicating a willingness to compromise, but only four regular sessions are scheduled before the end of the year.

Zapata urged civil society to keep up pressure on governments to negotiate. “Incremental pressure we have seen in the past seems to have been having an impact on the ability to engage,” he remarked. But he added that the negotiators would need to make more use of facilitators to complete the talks. On subsidies and overfishing, more work is necessary. Cross-cutting issues will need even more work.

The Pew representative said 53% of fishing subsidies were harmful, and 85% of them went to large-scale fisheries, of which less than half would be profitable without subsidies, particularly in fuel supplies.