

A GUIDE TO THE HONG KONG WTO MINISTERIAL

How rich countries are pressuring
poor countries into accepting
a bad deal at the WTO

Hong Kong, 13-18 December 2005

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Poor countries must demand an outcome from the negotiations that will truly bring about development. They must resist a trade-off and insist on trade justice. Only then will millions of the world's poorest people face a better future.

Adriano Campolina Soares

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ActionAid International's short guide to the WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong explains why the world's poorest people stand to lose so much from the proposals currently on the negotiating table and what can be done to ensure that they get trade justice.

Contents:

Introduction	1
Democracy WTO-style	2
Agriculture	3
Manufactured goods	5
Services	6
The big trade-off	7
ActionAid's recommendations	8
Trade dictionary	9

The WTO at a glance'

Founded: 1995, to succeed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)

Headquarters: secretariat based in Geneva with 600 staff and headed by a director-general, currently Pascal Lamy

Members: 149 countries, accounting for more than 97% of world trade; newest member: Saudi Arabia

Purpose: in theory the WTO is meant to help trade flow smoothly, freely, fairly and predictably by administering trade agreements, acting as a forum for trade negotiations, settling trade disputes, reviewing national trade policies, and assisting developing countries in trade policy issues through technical assistance and training programmes

Previous ministerial meetings: Singapore 1996, Geneva 1998, Seattle 1999, Doha 2001, Cancun 2003

Previous rounds of talks: (under GATT) Geneva 1947, Ancey 1949, Torquay 1951, Geneva 1956, Dillon 1960-61, Kennedy 1964-67, Tokyo 1973-79, and Uruguay 1986-94 (which led to the formation of the WTO)

Current round of talks: Doha, originally due for completion no later than 1 January 2005

Doha declaration extract: "International trade can play a major role in the promotion of economic development and the alleviation of poverty. We recognize the need for **all our peoples** to benefit from the increased opportunities and welfare gains that the multilateral trading system generates.

The majority of WTO members are developing countries. We seek to place their needs and interests at the heart of the Work Programme adopted in this Declaration."

Introduction

In mid-December, ministers from the World Trade Organisation's 149 member states gather in Hong Kong for their sixth summit. This top-level meeting, which takes place at least every two years, was meant to see the conclusion of the so-called 'Doha Round' of talks, but the negotiations are making little progress at the moment. Instead, the main aim of the Hong Kong meeting will be to try and agree a way for moving the negotiations forward so that they can be concluded by the end of next year.

Trade secret

**World's 35 developed economies
= 65% of global merchandise exports**

**World's 49 poorest economies
= 0.6% of global merchandise exports²**

The current round of talks, named after the city in the Gulf state of Qatar where they were launched in 2001, are also known as the 'development round', because they are meant to culminate in an agreement that ensures trade rules help fight poverty rather than increase it.

The WTO's richer members, especially the US and the EU, think that the best way to achieve this is through 'trade liberalisation' where countries move more and more towards 'free trade' by removing barriers to the flow of goods and services between countries. These barriers, often described as 'trade-distorting', include measures such as quotas, tariffs and subsidies.

In the current WTO negotiations, the EU, US and other rich countries are therefore pushing poorer countries to agree to lower

their trade barriers so that rich countries can sell goods and services to developing countries' markets. At the same time, they are failing to follow their own advice and indulging in unfair trade practices.

What's more, ActionAid has been listening to the real-life stories of poor people in the African, Asian and Latin American countries in which we work, and what we have discovered is disturbing. Far from alleviating poverty and bringing about development, we believe that 'freer trade' is hurting the very people it is meant to be helping, and that the livelihoods of millions of poor people around the world could be threatened by the outcomes of the current WTO negotiations.

As the talks have proceeded over the past few years, the focus has gradually shifted away from poverty alleviation towards ways to free up trade and open new markets for rich countries' goods and services. Their ultimate aim has been lost and now they are a 'development' round in name only. Instead, they have become a 'market access' round to help rich countries get richer.

Therefore, even though it seems that no final agreements will be signed in Hong Kong, it is still very important that any plan for moving the negotiations forward recognises that the needs of the world's poorest countries are central to ensuring the Doha Round, when it concludes next year, achieves its true aim and brings about development.

For this to happen, ActionAid believes that poor countries must have the right to protect vital crops, industries and services from cheap goods and unfair competition from the EU and US. The current trade deal is unacceptable and, if it does not change, poor countries must reject it.

The three areas of negotiations that dominate the talks are agriculture, manufactured goods and services. These are explained in more detail on pages 3 to 6.



"If there is no agreement in Hong Kong, a bad deal may well have been averted, but millions of poor people will, once again, be left waiting for a fair trade deal. It is time for rich countries to make genuine concessions, rather than continuing to pursue an agenda of self interest."

Aftab Alam Khan, head of ActionAid's trade justice campaign

Democracy WTO-style: how trade agreements are reached

The WTO supposedly operates on the principle of 'one-member, one vote'. In theory, therefore, it should be a perfect democracy. But, the WTO doesn't actually hold votes. If it did, rich countries would always be outnumbered by poor countries. Instead, decisions are reached through a process called 'passive consensus' whereby a member country is understood to have agreed unless it explicitly says 'no', even if that country's representative isn't present at a meeting.

This leaves the doors open to abuse, with richer countries pressurising poorer ones to 'agree' to what they want. Ample evidence of arm-twisting and bullying has been documented in books like *Behind the Scenes at the WTO*³ and reports like ActionAid's *Divide and Rule*. Even one of the WTO's former director-generals, Mike Moore, has said: "There is also no denying that some members are more equal than others."

Rich countries have been known to use all kinds of tactics to get what they want: threats to cut aid and debt relief, demands that 'difficult' trade representatives or 'troublemakers' be sacked, and sometimes promises that they will do what poor countries ask in the future.

Powerful countries and trading blocs therefore dominate the WTO. The United States, the European Union, Japan, Canada and Australia are the key rich countries, and some of the bigger developing countries – Brazil, India, China and South Africa – have also more recently become key players.

They meet behind closed doors to work out agreements amongst themselves. It is no secret that they do this and some of the groupings even have names. For instance, one group called 'FIPs' (Five Interested Parties) is made up of the US, EU, Australia, Brazil and India and they meet mainly to discuss agriculture. In 'FIPs Plus', meanwhile, the same group is joined by Japan, Switzerland, Canada, China and New Zealand to discuss issues beyond agriculture such as manufactured goods and services. There is also 'the Quad' consisting of the WTO's most powerful members (US, EU, Japan and Canada) and now the 'New Quad' (US, EU, India and Brazil). And, if the Quad and FIPs join together, they form the QUIPs!

Poorer countries have formed their own groupings too in an effort to withstand the pressure from richer countries. The G-20, currently a group of 21 developing countries, is economically the strongest of these groups. It includes countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, South Africa, Nigeria, India, Thailand and Indonesia. The G-33 currently takes in 44 countries while the G-90 represents many of the least-developed countries, with some members belonging to more than one group.

Agriculture

The issues

Agriculture is a key issue in the current negotiations. This is because any decisions to do with agriculture will affect the lives of about half of the world's population. An estimated 1.3 billion people globally work in agriculture and another 1.5 billion depend on the sector for their livelihoods. In some poor countries, such as Malawi and Ethiopia, more than 80% of the population is employed in the sector.⁴

The WTO recognises the importance of agriculture and there is a special set of rules, called the Agreement on Agriculture, which governs international trade in food and other farming produce. Under this agreement, member countries are meant to make commitments towards reducing their agricultural trade barriers. These barriers include tariffs on goods entering a country and subsidies that governments pay to their farmers to keep them in business.

Subsidies

Rich countries, especially the EU and the US, provide huge amounts of subsidies to their farmers and corporations. They claim that they have been reducing their agricultural subsidies over the years, as the WTO's rules require, but, in reality, they haven't made any substantial cuts. There are three different categories of subsidies (known as 'boxes') and, instead, what they do is swap their subsidies by clever accounting from one category to another to get around the rules.

The US and the EU have recently put new offers to cut subsidies on the negotiating table, but again these really only involve moving subsidies from one box to another and reducing subsidy 'ceilings' (the highest amounts countries can give, rather than the actual amount they do give). The US currently gives \$25 billion a year in domestic farm subsidies, but we estimate that under their new proposal they will still give \$17-27 billion a year. Likewise, the EU gives around €64 billion a year but will still give €55-58 billion if their recent offer is implemented. Furthermore, the EU's latest 'offer' isn't even anything new: it was first announced in 2003 as part of reforms to the bloc's Common Agricultural Policy.

Meanwhile, poor countries have been lowering their subsidies and tariffs either to comply with WTO rules or because they have been required to as a condition for securing aid and development loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

This combination of circumstances can have a devastating effect on poor farming communities. Certain agricultural exports from rich countries are 'dumped' on world markets at prices below their cost of production because the farmers producing them have been subsidised. At the same time, farmers in the developing world are receiving few or no subsidies to support their farming activities and there are low or no tariffs on goods entering the country. Cheap, subsidised goods therefore flood into poor countries where the local population, logically, buys what is cheapest.

- In the **Gambia**, cheap imports of chicken, eggs, milk and rice have flooded the market, depressing prices and putting many local producers out of business. Chicken imports, mostly from the EU, have shot up tenfold over the past decade, forcing local poultry farms to close.
- In northern **Ghana**, cheap, subsidised rice and tomatoes have flooded the market. Most farmers have not made any money from farming rice in recent years and, in 2002 and 2004, two-thirds actually lost money.
- In **West Africa**, 10 million poor cotton farmers face hardship and hunger as they struggle to compete against cheap US cotton dumped on world markets because 25,000 wealthy US cotton producers receive \$3 billion a year in subsidies.⁵



Gideon Mendel/Corbis/ActionAid

Trading places

“Rice farming is no longer lucrative because imported rice is cheaper than locally produced rice. We cannot make ends meet. The field we used to plant rice in is now lying fallow and it’s being used to play football. We are being forced to compete in foreign markets – it’s like our under-20 football team facing Manchester United. Tell me, is this equal? Is this fair? It is a big shame to be a farmer now.”

John Ayariga, rice farmer, Upper East Region, Ghana

“With 95% of our potential customers overseas, ... we must secure access to the customers of the world to maintain growing profits. Our goal in the Doha negotiations is to help level the playing field for our agriculture producers by opening new markets and facilitating the most efficient movement of goods across borders, ...to the great benefit of the US farm community.”

Robert Portman, US Trade Representative, 21 September 2005⁶

Special treatment for poor countries

Although the Agreement on Agriculture proposals currently under discussion require members to commit to reducing their agricultural trade barriers, developing countries are pushing for a provision which grants them ‘special and differential treatment’.

Under their proposal, developing countries would be allowed to nominate a number of ‘special products’, usually essential food crops, on which they don’t have to reduce tariffs and domestic subsidies. This then protects their farmers from the ravages of international competition. Developing countries are also pushing for an enhanced ‘special safeguard mechanism’ to raise trade barriers temporarily when cheap imports surge into their markets and force prices down so that local farmers can’t compete.

Although the provision for special treatment is clearly stated in the WTO’s rules, little progress has been made in establishing which products can be designated as special products and how the special safeguard mechanism will work. Rich countries have been holding up the negotiations while they argue about the pros and cons of the provisions. At the same time, some rich countries have introduced a new category of ‘sensitive products’ into the negotiations to protect several of their own sectors from exports from other countries.

Trade secret

Rich pickings: In the UK, the Queen received around £400,000 in subsidies during the 2003-2004 financial year while Prince Albert of Monaco received more than €280,000.⁷

The solutions: ActionAid’s recommendations

We believe that all poor countries have the right to protect their farmers and the wider population, especially from the dumping of cheap imports. Therefore, we call for:

- developed countries to announce an early end date for the genuine elimination of all trade-distorting subsidies
- agricultural dumping to be prohibited
- developing countries to have the right to protect key agricultural sectors through the use of Special Products and a Special Safeguard Mechanism.

For more information, read *Trade Invaders: the WTO and developing countries’ right to protect* at <http://www.actionaid.org.uk/wps/content/documents/Trade-Invaders.rtf>



“The recent offers by the EU and the US to cut subsidies are nothing more than an illusion. They aren’t fooling anyone. Why should a poor sugar cane farmer in Kenya have to suffer just because rich countries are dumping their left-overs on the world market? It’s about time they put something real on the negotiating table.”

Angela Wauye, ActionAid Kenya

Manufactured goods

The issues

Another major area being negotiated at the WTO is trade in manufactured and industrial goods, or all the products that don't fall under the Agreement on Agriculture, such as machinery, electronic goods, chemicals and textiles.

In the current negotiations on an agreement governing 'non-agricultural market access' (NAMA), rich countries are pushing for major reductions in developing countries' tariffs on industrial imports. They claim this is in developing countries' own interests, but we believe they are doing it to make it easier for their multinational corporations to make bigger profits.

Industrial tariffs play an important role in protecting infant industries, creating jobs and tackling balance of payments problems. In fact, when today's rich countries were industrialising, they used tariffs to do exactly this, as did countries such as South Korea and Taiwan more recently.

Increased international trade can help bring about economic growth and reduce poverty, but in countries where this has happened, such as those in East Asia, trade barriers were brought down slowly, often after the countries had developed, as part of a well-planned strategy. However, when trade barriers have been brought down quickly and prematurely, for example as a condition for obtaining a World Bank or IMF loan, poor countries have often suffered. Countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, Ecuador, Ghana and Zimbabwe are just some of many that experienced 'de-industrialisation' as output fell and factories closed in the face of competition from advanced developed countries.

- The removal of tariffs on textile imports has forced 20 factories in **Nigeria** to close with the loss of over 16,000 jobs. A further 18 factories are threatened with closure. Since 1998, almost two-thirds of jobs in the sector have been lost.
- In **India**, reductions in import tariffs on industrial products such as textiles and leather have resulted in an increase in cheaper imports and the closure of many companies. In 2004, nearly 500 textile mills closed.

Trade secret

Do as we say, not as we do:
Average tariffs on industrial goods⁸

USA	1950	14%
GB	1950	23%
China	2001	12%
All developing countries	2001	8%

Trading places

"I feel sad about the future filled with...everyone suffering. There is no work, I am just sitting begging."

Vishambar, silk handloom weaver, Varanasi, India

"The US...will benefit the most from bold trade liberalisation reforms."

Robert Portman, US Trade Representative, 21 September 2005⁹



"If the final deal is anything like the one on the table at the moment then ActionAid believes that poor countries must make history at the WTO and reject it."

Tim Rice, ActionAid UK

The solutions: ActionAid's recommendations

We believe that all poor countries have the right to protect their infant industries until they are ready to compete in the global marketplace. Therefore they should have the right to choose what they want to liberalise and when they want to do it, without being restricted by a WTO agreement. As with agriculture, their special treatment provisions need to be firmed up.

For more information, read *Looming Crisis: the threat of industrial trade liberalisation negotiations at the WTO on India's textile and leather industries* at www.actionaid.org.uk/100200/wto.html

Services

The issues

Services are the fastest-growing sector in the global economy and include everything from banking and IT to construction to tourism to public services such as health, education, transport and water supply. Currently services account for around 25% of world trade, but the potential for growth in this sector is massive and therefore it's another hotly debated issue in the WTO negotiations.

In the talks on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), poor countries are under pressure to open up their service sectors to foreign suppliers. At the moment, in theory, the process is voluntary and any country can make an offer to open up one of its service sectors or request that another country opens up a certain sector. Because this voluntary 'request-offer' process has been, according to EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, "depressingly slow",¹⁰ rich countries are now pushing to replace it with one that requires minimum commitments from all countries.

The threat to poor people comes from under-regulated foreign providers taking over key service sectors in poor countries. Nothing – not even essential services such as education, healthcare and water supply – is excluded from possible liberalisation in these negotiations, and this is where the main danger lies. Once in private hands, companies can put profit before poor people's needs for access to these basic necessities. The Philippines, Indonesia, Argentina, Bolivia and South Africa have all reported disconnections and price increases following privatisation in their water sectors and this has led to increased hardship for poor people.

- In **South Africa**, water privatisation has meant that around half a million people were cut off for not paying their water bills during a three-month period in 2001. Outbreaks of cholera have also been reported as families resort to drawing water from polluted rivers.

"Poor people's right to life's necessities, such as water, education and healthcare, are not negotiable. The EU and US must put people before profit and stop pushing poor countries to open their service sectors to foreign competition."

James Kintu, ActionAid Uganda

Trading places

"This has affected us so much ... You think twice now ... whether to buy a loaf of bread or save it to buy water."

Jennifer Makoatsane, private water company customer, Soweto, South Africa

"We want to ... grow markets in which to sell European goods and services. Multilateral [WTO] negotiations offer the biggest prize in achieving this."

Peter Mandelson, EU Trade Commissioner, 2 July 2005¹¹

The solutions: ActionAid's recommendations

We believe that poor countries have the right to protect their services as they see fit and therefore developed countries should stop forcing poor countries to liberalise this sector. In particular, public services, such as water, education and health, should be explicitly excluded from liberalisation commitments. And, as with agriculture and industrial goods, special treatment provisions for poor countries must be firmed up before any commitments on services are made.

For more information, read *Down the Plughole: why bringing water into WTO negotiations would unleash a development disaster* at www.actionaid.org.uk/100200/wto.html



SvenTorfin/Panos/ActionAid

The big trade-off

The issue

Another aspect of the current negotiations that concerns us draws together the three main negotiating areas – agriculture, industrial products and services. Not only are the US and EU resisting calls to make meaningful cuts in the agricultural subsidies they provide to their farmers, but they have also tied any offers they have made – no matter how small those offers are – to commitments from developing countries to open their markets for industrial goods and services. They are linking three completely separate areas together in order to gain negotiating leverage. The stance of the EU, in particular, is clear.

“When the crunch comes, the [EU]...will be heavily influenced by how ambitious all WTO members are on NAMA and services. And there will certainly be no deal on agriculture unless and until there is a balanced outcome across the board.”

Peter Mandelson, EU Trade Commissioner, 10 October 2005¹²

The solution: ActionAid's recommendations

We believe that the rich countries' approach to the WTO negotiations is completely unacceptable. This is, after all, a development round and therefore poor countries should not have to pay for rich countries' concessions.

AIDS drugs and the WTO: complicated paperwork denies poor people's right to healthcare

Another issue that is of vital importance to developing countries is the TRIPs agreement that governs intellectual property rights. The current TRIPs waiver for pharmaceutical products (that allows the least-developed countries to import generic drugs to deal with emergencies such as the HIV and AIDS crisis) is too complicated and prevents countries from exercising their rights to medical technology at cheaper prices. We believe that poor countries should have the right to produce or import cheap drugs in the simplest way possible.



Unmesh Pandey/ActionAid

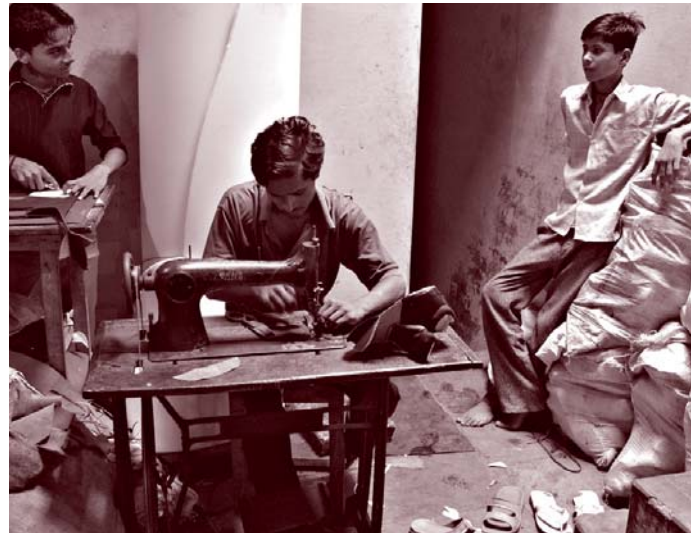


“Don't get us wrong, ActionAid does believe that trade can benefit poor people and that a rules-based system can work. It's just that the rich countries' unwillingness to make any serious concessions is turning the current negotiations into a sham.”

Moussa Faye, ActionAid Senegal

ActionAid's Trade Justice team will be in Hong Kong campaigning for developing countries' right to protect their economies from unfair foreign competition so that the livelihoods of millions of poor people in Africa, Asia and Latin America are not threatened.

Tom Pietrasik/ActionAid



Tom Pietrasik/ActionAid



"Poor countries must demand an outcome from the negotiations that will truly bring about development. They must resist a trade-off and insist on trade justice. Only then will millions of the world's poorest people face a better future."

Adriano Campolina Soares, director ActionAid Americas.

ActionAid's recommendations:

If the final trade deal is anything like the one on the table at the moment, poor countries should reject it.

Agriculture

- Developed countries must announce an early end date for the elimination of all trade-distorting subsidies.
- Agricultural dumping must be prohibited.
- Developing countries must have the right to protect key agricultural sectors through the use of Special Products and a Special Safeguard Mechanism.

Manufactured goods

- All poor countries must have the right to protect their industries until they are ready to compete in the global marketplace.

Services

- Basic services such as water, education and healthcare are not negotiable. The EU and US must stop pushing for poor countries to open their services sectors to foreign competition.

TRIPs

- Poor countries should have the right to produce or import life-saving medicines.

Trade-offs

- Rich countries' offers on agriculture should not depend on commitments from developing countries to open their markets for industrial goods and services.

Democracy at the WTO

- Poor countries should not be excluded from trade talks.

Trade dictionary

Agreement on Agriculture: The first global framework for the long-term reform of agricultural trade, through the creation of specific rules and commitments for international and domestic agricultural activities, e.g. on border measures such as **tariffs**, **export subsidies** and **domestic support**.

Agriculture: In the WTO context, agriculture covers a wide range of products derived from the livestock, arable and horticultural sector, including meat, dairy, fruit, vegetables, grains, wool, wine, tobacco and many processed goods.

Common Agricultural Policy: The EU's internal agricultural policy, intended to provide stable agricultural markets and incomes for European farmers and food for European consumers through a system of **domestic support**, market access protection and **export subsidies**. It has been in place now for over 45 years and is one of the most controversial aspects of the European Union.

Domestic support: Government support for the domestic agriculture sector, through direct payments to farmers or other measures such as price-setting.

Dumping: Exporting goods at a price lower than the cost of production (usually due to subsidies).

Export subsidy: A government payment provided to exporters. It effectively allows them to lower their offer price in world markets.

Free trade: Perfect free trade means removing all barriers to trade between countries. This would include: removing all quotas on goods coming into a country, scrapping all taxes on goods coming into a country, eliminating all forms of government support to industries and farmers. No country has ever gone to quite this extreme but 'free trade policies' are those which move a country in this direction.

Special and differential treatment: Flexibility, given to developing countries in implementing WTO commitments, allowing longer phase-in times and addressing concerns such as food security and rural development.

Subsidy: Government money provided to a person or company related to the production of a good or service.

Tariff: A tax on international trade.

Trade justice: Trade justice means that developing country governments would be able to freely choose the best policies to end poverty, unimpeded by WTO restrictions. Governments would be able to intervene in their national economies to protect vulnerable farmers and promote national industries. Trade justice also means that rich countries would stop harmful practices like dumping, and regulate their multinational companies effectively. Trade rules should work in favour of poor people.

Trade liberalisation: A move towards perfect free trade. Usually it refers to governments reducing tariffs. The result is that the goods coming into the country become cheaper (because there is less tax on them). This can sometimes threaten nationally-produced goods. Eventually national producers may no longer be able to sell their goods in the national market – putting them out of business and leading to job losses. This is especially likely to happen if trade liberalisation happens rapidly, across a wide range of goods (blanket liberalisation) and is externally imposed (forced liberalisation).

[Sources include: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; American Friends Service Committee; Deardorff's Glossary of International Economics]

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