

29 November 2004
ENGLISH ONLY

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Round Table on Promoting Trade for Sustainable Development
São Paulo, 17 June 2004

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

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The round table focused on the role of international trade in promoting sustainable development in developing countries. The nearly 200 participants included ministers and other high-level government officials, current and former chairpersons of the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment in regular and special session, representatives from international non-governmental, academic and private sector organizations, and representatives from international organizations. The main topics addressed were: (a) opportunities arising from niche markets for environmentally preferable products and services; (b) challenges arising from foreign environmental requirements, as well as benefits that could be derived from proactive adjustment policies; and (c) capacity building needs and responses. The round table discussions were supported by a background paper (TD/(XI)/BP/10) prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat.

Mr. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), delivered a keynote address. The Director of the Division on Trade in Goods and Services, and Commodities (DITC) highlighted UNCTAD's role in trade, environment and development, a number of practical initiatives, and the launching of the Trade and Environment Review. This was followed by a panel of experts moderated by Mr. Toufiq Ali, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh and Chairman of the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment special session. Presentations were given both on trading opportunities for environmentally preferable products, including organic agricultural products, and on the outcome of the pre-UNCTAD XI workshop on Environmental Requirements and Market Access for Developing Countries, organized jointly by the UNCTAD secretariat and the National Institute of Metrology, Standardization and Industrial Quality (Inmetro), Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro on 7 and 8 June 2004.

The Secretary-General of UNCTAD highlighted UNCTAD's pioneering work in the area of trade and sustainable development and its cooperation with other institutions, in particular UNEP. During a second panel discussion, chaired by Messrs Rubens Ricupero and Klaus Töpfer, ministers and other high-level government officials from Angola, Barbados, Brazil, Cambodia, Mauritius and Uganda presented national experiences and identified policies and measures required at national and international levels to promote sustainable development through trade. They also identified the capacity-building measures needed to assist them in enhancing awareness of opportunities to use trade to promote sustainable development and in integrating these opportunities effectively into their national development and poverty alleviation strategies.

The round table paid special attention to the capacity needs of developing countries and welcomed achievements and future activities by the UNEP-UNCTAD Capacity Building Task Force on Trade, Environment and Development (CBTF). It was emphasized that the São Paulo Consensus, in paragraph 103, recommended that the CBTF should be strengthened. As described in the background paper for the meeting and a special UNCTAD XI issue of the CBTF newsletter, African countries will be the main beneficiaries of future CBTF activities, with a specific component for Portuguese-speaking countries. The CBTF will continue to assist least developed countries (LDCs) in Africa and other regions, in particular as regards training, for example in Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The CBTF will furthermore carry out capacity-building activities on trade and sustainable development issues that are particularly relevant for small island developing States (SIDS), including in the context of the 10-year review of the Barbados Plan of Action and the meeting in Mauritius

planned for January 2005. These will include follow-up on the results of a regional seminar for Caribbean countries, which was held in Kingston in November 2003. Finally, it is envisaged that the CBTF will provide seed funding for a programme for Andean countries. High-level participants from beneficiary countries presented relevant national experiences, and they expressed appreciation for ongoing and planned CBTF activities, as well as their commitment to support appropriate follow-up. The focus on Africa, LDCs and SIDS was well appreciated.

Participants stressed the importance of national policies in developing countries to create awareness and take advantage of opportunities for environmentally preferable products and services. Markets were promising, but certain obstacles needed to be removed. Participants highlighted the need for international efforts to overcome problems arising from the multiplicity of standards and to address issues in the area of certification, particularly in the case of smallholders in developing countries. In this context they underlined the importance of the work of the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) created by UNCTAD, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements. One participant proposed that Brazil should be included in the national case studies carried out under the umbrella of the Task Force.

Participants also stressed the important role of traditional knowledge (TK) in the development process and the need for national and international actions aimed at harnessing this resource for trade and development. The CBTF could play an important role in supporting capacity building efforts in the field of access to TK and benefit sharing. The importance of active developing country participation in the upcoming negotiations on the Convention on Biological Diversity on an international regime on access to genetic resources and related TK and benefit sharing was stressed.

Several participants highlighted national sustainable development efforts in the agricultural and tourism sectors. As had been recommended at the Pre-UNCTAD XI High-Level International Meeting of Experts on Sustainable Tourism for Development, held in Lisbon, Portugal, on 8-11 March 2004, the CBTF could be used as an important framework for promoting the development of sustainable tourism strategies, in cooperation with the World Tourism Organization, placing particular emphasis on the diversification and enhancement of tourism products and strengthening linkages between tourism and local products such as organic products and handicrafts.

Several panellists said that their countries needed to develop institutional, human and technical capacities so that their products meet increasingly frequent and stringent environmental and health requirements in key export markets. They also regarded this challenge as an opportunity to improve the competitiveness of their products in international markets and to enhance resource efficiency, occupational safety and health, as well as environmental conditions. However, their countries needed to develop a strategic and coherent national approach. External support was needed, in particular in the case of developing countries that had yet to initiate or were only at the very beginning of this process.

A representative of Inmetro presented the outcome of the pre-UNCTAD XI workshop on Environmental Requirements and Market Access for Developing Countries, in particular the concept and potential initial activities of a Consultative Task Force (CTF). A summary report of that workshop (TD/L.378) was made available at the round table. Panellists and other round table participants welcomed and expressed their intention to actively participate in relevant CTF activities.

Participants also expressed appreciation for other UNCTAD capacity-building activities, in particular the project “Building capacity for improved policy making and negotiation on key trade and environment issues”, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Biotrade Initiative and training activities under the TrainforTrade programme, and highlighted synergies between different projects.

A number of forthcoming CBTF events were announced, including a training Workshop on Integrated Assessment for African Countries on 19-20 July at UNEP Headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya; a Workshop for Portuguese-speaking countries, hosted by the Government of Angola in Luanda in August or September 2004; and national training workshops in Cambodia and Laos.