

Tuesday 21 March 2017

Session 2: Structural Reforms and accession negotiation strategies

10.15am – WTO accession negotiation strategies: The case of Samoa [10 minutes]

1. Samoa negotiated its WTO membership as a Least Developed Country. We concluded negotiations at the end of 2011 and the 8th Ministerial Conference in December 2011 in Geneva adopted Samoa's Accession Protocol. Two years later, Samoa graduated from LDC status in 2014. Our target, and perhaps overall strategy was to negotiate the terms of accession as a LDC before we graduated.

Prior to submitting our application in 1998, we had undertaken a cost-benefit analysis of Samoa acceding to the WTO. The overall recommendation was that it was better to be part of the MTS than not. The government had already begun a process of comprehensive reform in the public sector as well as tariffs and taxation. Samoa saw that the process complemented national efforts to reform trade. For us, this was a good starting point and the 14 years of the accession process for us was an invaluable learning experience.

2. Prior to the 2002 Guidelines for LDC Accession, we only could refer or look to previous accessions. No LDC had concluded accession at the time and when Nepal and Cambodia concluded, their working party reports became a central point of reference. We also shared experiences with acceding countries from the Pacific Region whom we shared similarities – Vanuatu and Tonga.
3. Comments yesterday from the representative of the US (Cecilia Klein) were noted - referring to the Guidelines as 'helpful, but plans and transitions are more useful'. We fully agree with the latter but the guidelines are exactly what they are suppose to be – to guide accession processes otherwise there was no

process and boundaries in which the negotiations would be conducted. Samoa had often referred to the Guidelines, especially when confronted with requests from members that we believed Samoa was not able to deliver on.

4. But at the same time, it was equally important for Samoa that we were able to demonstrate to WTO members our willingness to undertake reforms where appropriate and sustainably beneficial for Samoa, noting that further work would be required to achieve compliance with WTO rules and principles. Samoa understood that negotiations required flexibility and compromise at some stage. It was a process of finding balance between national interests, ability to implement and conforming to WTO rules.
5. This was when planning, plans of plans... of all sorts became crucial. The conclusion of our negotiations would not have been possible without the mutual agreement to plan on how Samoa would transition to meet WTO rules.
6. The absence of a Samoa mission in Geneva probably contributed to the prolonged process for us. We used most opportunities that brought us to Geneva for other meetings to hold informal Working Party Meetings and progress bilateral negotiations. You will see from the WTO Accession Acquis that Samoa only had 2 Working Party Meetings. Between that were several informal sessions in Geneva. The leadership of our Working Party Chair (Japan) came through in facilitating this.
7. Between visits to Geneva we communicated via email with the Secretariat and our bilateral partners. The support of our bilateral partners is important. We were able to utilize the Australian and New Zealand High Commission offices in Samoa to facilitate negotiations resulting in earlier conclusions of bilateral negotiations with Australia and New Zealand.

8. Financial and technical assistance was readily available - Coordination was important and continues to be in terms of making the assistance targeted to the needs and priorities of Samoa.
9. Political commitment is an absolute necessity as we heard from the interventions yesterday. The last 12 months of the process saw the deputy prime minister chair the NWCTA; and fast tracked Cabinet approval of negotiating positions / mandates.
10. National awareness of Samoa's WTO accession and the potential impact of Samoa's membership was an ongoing process. The buy – in of all stakeholders was important particularly towards the end of the process.
11. Our awareness campaigns included a public forum, workshops for the government officials, private sector, parliamentarians and other non-government stakeholders. It is important to sensitize our national stakeholders on Samoa's accession package and obligations.