

WTO talks- operation successful, patient dead

Trade and human development are interlinked and the possible fall out of the somewhat 'stalled' or 'collapsed' trade negotiations under the World Trade Organization (WTO) would largely affect the poor, particularly the farmers in the world. Though in the rich countries' perspective end of talks can be a successful operation, but the reality is that the patient is dead.

This was the crux of the presentations by various experts on international trade and human development here on Monday during the first day of the Two-day media workshop organized by the Journalists for Democracy and Human Rights (JDHR) in collaboration with TIHP/UNDP and the Ministry of Commerce. Khalid Jamil from JDHR briefly said that media can best track trade issues in favour and interest of their audience. He said JDHR organizes such workshop to sharpen skills of journalists and develop story ideas from experts' presentations.

Zubair Faisal Abbasi of TIHP/UNDP said there is a need to see trade in a sustainable human development perspective and develop social policy framework for all policies to be developed which includes trade policy, industrial policies, and the finance bill. The success of any policy must be measured against increase in sectoral employment and increase in household income levels. He emphasized on the importance of coherent and consistent policy framework on signing of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and PTAs. is important in this regard.

He said income inequalities need to be addressed. Empowerment in decision making, equity and sustainability are other indicators to see trade in human development perspective. He linked the empowerment, sustainability, equity, and productivity with progress towards achieving Millennium Development Goals. According to him the elements would play a critical role in Pakistan's capacity to work effectively on achievements of would be the critical indicators

While talking about suspension of doha work programme, Dr Abid Suleri said a state of inertia is certainly not in favour of developing economies such as Pakistan. He was of the opinion that major trading powers are conducting trade through bilateral and plurilateral arrangements and hence they can survive without WTO however Pakistan which is not a party to any meaningful FTA/RTA would be at the losing end.

He was critical of what he said the government is still not able to alien with any potential trading blocs in WTO instead it tried to please every bloc, thus losing its bargaining chip. Connecting the current stalled negotiations at WTO with domestic politics of the United States, Brazil and France, he said that nothing concrete would be achieved on Doha work plan in near future. As democratically elected governments in these countries would try to protect interest of their voters and will not show any flexibility to win elections in these countries. He said media played important role in highlighting trade issues in public interest.

Dr Sajjad Akhtar, director Centre for Research on Poverty Reduction and Income Distribution, said trade needs to be linked to poverty reduction by increasing employment and by ensuring that benefit of trade should be in favour of the consumers, the buyers at lower prices. He said employment generating activities could add to poverty reduction in real sense and it would help improve economic welfare of the poor.

He was of the view that cuts in public spending on welfare and social-sector programmes that can occur due to lost revenues after trade liberalization are among the key costs of greater trade openness. He said the issue of trade and poverty cannot be reduced to the issue of trade liberalization and poverty and sustained poverty reduction occurs through the efficient development and utilization of productive capacities

Dr Sajjad said the relationship between trade and poverty varies with the level of development of a country and the structure of its economy. This relationship is affected by interdependence between trade and international financial and investment flows, between trade and debt and between trade and technology transfer.

Ghulam Mustafa Talpur of Actionaid said several national and international factors are creating hurdles in citizens' right to be free from hunger. Increasing dominant role of transnational corporation involved in food business is draining the wealth from poor communities through high input cost and lower production prices by using unfair and unethical trading practices. There is a severe need to regulate the business of Food Corporation such as Monsanto, ICI, Nestle and others which are controlling seed, pesticide and milk market in Pakistan, he added.

He said in addition to the increasing role of corporations, the unfair trade rules and involvement of international financial institutions in national policy making process is also hampering the efforts to reduce hunger from Pakistan. Reduced agriculture expenditure, fiscal austerity, rising debt, mono-cropping and increasing role of market are the prescription suggested by IFIs are robbing poor peasants of Pakistan.

Mustafa said to removing the international factors which are undermining the ability of national governments to fulfill the right to food of citizen, the national policies including concentration of land, denying poor people access to and control over natural resources, flawed agriculture development model and inadequate mechanism for controlling inflation and creating employment opportunities are the serious concerns. The progress of Pakistan towards achieving World Food Summit goals as well as MDGs is very slow and data does not support that government is going to meet these goals in 2015 time frame.

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