
ANNUAL 2015 SESSION OF THE
PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

WTO at the age of 20

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**ADDRESS BY MR. KRISTER ÖRNFJÄDER,
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Geneva, 16 February 2015

Fellow parliamentarians,
Distinguished representatives of governments and international organizations,
Ladies and gentlemen,

For two days, Geneva - the capital of multilateral trade diplomacy – will be hosting legislators who oversee international trade and development in their respective parliaments.

It is a great honour for me to address you on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union - your organization. Rich with its 125 years of history, the IPU takes pride in presently embracing 166 legislatures that together comprise over 43,000 parliamentarians who, in turn, represent 6.5 billion people.

The IPU is headquartered not far away from the WTO, in a building known in Geneva as the House of Parliaments. The Parliamentary Conference on the WTO should be seen as a bridge linking the House of Parliaments and the House of Trade, which is the WTO.

Together with the European Parliament, we started constructing this bridge thirteen years ago. Today, the bridge is fully operational, with heavy traffic in both directions.

For parliamentarians, it provides an effective tool for scrutinizing the multifaceted work of government negotiators involved in WTO talks. For diplomats and trade experts, it presents an unrivalled opportunity to expound to legislators the challenges of the negotiating process and the technical subtleties of compromise formulas. This knowledge is invaluable for the ratification of trade agreements.

As legislators, we are duty-bound to enact and amend laws, approve national budgets and hold governments to account. Unless transposed into national legislation and followed by robust oversight, international trade agreements will be neither credible nor effective.

Our objective is to use the constitutional leverage vested in parliamentary institutions to influence, shape and provide critical input into WTO accords before they land in our parliaments for approval.

This is why we find it highly symbolic and very welcome that, for the third time now, our Parliamentary Conference is taking place on WTO premises.

The WTO has opened its doors to legislators in a demonstration of its growing external transparency. We are particularly pleased to be here at the start of the year when the WTO is celebrating its 20th anniversary. We have even given our session an appropriate overall title – "WTO at the age of 20". It is time for congratulations but also for reflection.

When the WTO came into being on 1 January 1995, no-one could foresee that the path chosen for it by Members would be so long and winding. Vested with unique powers, but framed by consensus-based decision-making rules, the WTO has become a true laboratory of multilateralism.

There have been a few successes, but also countless problems, deadlocks and stoppages. Progress in Doha Round negotiations has been particularly slow. Launched over 13 years ago, it has become the longest running Round ever.

At our parliamentary session in Bali, which we organized in parallel with the 9th WTO Ministerial Conference, we expressed our conviction that the main purpose of the multilateral trading system should be to allow people to benefit from increased opportunities and welfare gains generated by trade. We welcomed the adoption of the Bali Package with a renewed sense of hope that new dynamics had been injected into trade negotiations and that the Doha Development Round would finally come to fruition.

It was therefore with grave concern that, in the middle of 2014, we observed a situation where WTO talks were once again stalled. Speaking on behalf of the global parliamentary community, the Steering Committee of our Conference stated unequivocally that failure to deliver on the promise of Bali was not an option for the WTO.

It seems that the appeal of parliamentarians has been heard.

We applaud the recent decisions of the WTO General Council aimed at opening the way for a full-scale implementation of the Bali Package and in particular the Trade Facilitation Accord (TFA), which is expected to benefit the global economy by hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

As we know, that Accord will only become legally binding once it has been ratified by two-thirds of WTO Members. This is where the role of parliaments is indispensable. Together, we must make sure that the TFA ratification process goes forward as speedily as possible. We shall have ample opportunities to discuss this matter in the course of our deliberations today and tomorrow.

The agenda of our session is rich and wide-ranging.

We shall start with a series of presentations on the substantive theme, "Trade as an enabler of peace and better living conditions". When it is based on fair rules, trade is the best development tool at the disposal of all. At the same time, trade is indispensable for maintaining peaceful relations and cooperation among nations. The latter aspect is particularly relevant in the year marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. While discussing this broad subject, let us not forget to look at how we, parliamentarians, can make the best possible use of the potential of trade as a driver of peace and prosperity.

The highlight of this afternoon's programme is the policy dialogue with senior WTO negotiators and officials. It has become traditional to invite to our sessions Ambassadors who chair various WTO councils, committees and working parties. It is they who bear the bulk of responsibility for moving the negotiations forward. For legislators dealing with trade matters, it is always interesting and useful to engage with these top-level WTO experts who are the best-placed to tell us the true story.

The subject of the interactive panel with Ambassadors is highly topical: how to keep the WTO negotiations on the right track now that the post-Bali settlement has been found. As we know, WTO members are in the process of defining a work programme designed to conclude the Doha Round. They have set July as the deadline to elaborate such a plan. There is no time to waste.

I am sure that you will have many questions for the distinguished Ambassadors – both those who will be on the podium and those who will remain in the room. I am told that there are many of them with us today. I take this opportunity to thank them all for attending the parliamentary session.

Tomorrow, we shall also have an opportunity to engage in a question-and-answer session with the WTO Director-General, Mr. Azevêdo. He will join us for a hearing not unlike those that we regularly hold with Ministers in our own parliaments, also known as question time.

During this interactive session, we expect the Director-General to focus on lessons learned from the twenty years of WTO's existence, but first and foremost to share with us his views on the post-Bali process. Let us make good use of this chance to ask him questions and make brief comments.

During the afternoon session tomorrow, we shall also hold a panel discussion on a subject that may appear to be relatively narrow, but in reality should serve as a prism for viewing a wider spectrum of questions. For years, the WTO has struggled to convince a sceptical public of the enduring value of multilateralism. Part of the problem is that social and economic opportunities created by trade are spread unequally and the benefits are not sufficiently inclusive.

As a sort of case study, the Conference Steering Committee has decided to single out the interests of consumers and the younger generation. How best to balance free trade and consumer protection? What can be done to better explain the benefits of the WTO to young people? We hope that the interactive panel, with the active participation of the audience, will help us find answers to these questions.

At the concluding sitting, we are expected to adopt an outcome document. The draft was prepared by the Rapporteur of the Steering Committee, Mr. Kil Jeong-woo of the Republic of Korea. Parliaments had until 31 January to submit their amendments. Tonight, the Steering Committee will conclude its consideration of all received amendments and elaborate a revised draft, which will be made available to all delegates tomorrow morning. It is my hope that we will be able to adopt it by consensus.

The IPU and the European Parliament, as the Conference co-organizers, have invested much time and energy into the preparation of the session. I wish to express my sincere thanks to the leadership and staff of the European Parliament - our partner in this exercise - for everything they have done to facilitate the process. We hope that the session will be crowned with success and look forward to a rich and constructive debate, in the true parliamentary tradition.

With these words, let me officially declare the annual 2015 Session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO open.