OECD DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

Working Paper No. 223

(Formerly Webdoc No. 11)

BUILDING CAPACITY TO TRADE: WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES?

by

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Research programme on:
Finance for Development

November 2003
DEV/DOC(2003)21

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RÉSUMÉ

La déclaration de Doha insiste sur le « rôle important » d'une « assistance technique bien ciblée et durablement financée et de programmes de renforcement des capacités ». Elle leur consacre une section entière et renouvelle l'engagement de ses pays membres à aider les plus pauvres d'entre eux à participer efficacement au système commercial multilatéral. Quelles sont les implications pratiques de cette déclaration ? Quel est l'objectif précis du « renforcement des capacités commerciales » (*trade capacity building* - TCB) ? Qui doit fournir l'assistance et selon quelles modalités ? Les résultats seront-ils totalement positifs pour les pays en développement ou bien comportent-ils des risques ? A mesure que davantage de fonds sont consacrés au TCB, au profit le plus souvent de pays ayant de très faibles capacités d'absorption, les bénéficiaires et les bailleurs doivent apporter des réponses claires à ces questions. A partir d'un examen récent des projets de renforcement des capacités commerciales conduits dans certains pays d'Afrique et des Caraïbes et en s'appuyant sur une analyse récente réalisée en Afrique de l'Est, ce document tente d'apporter quelques éléments de réponse[1].

SUMMARY

The Doha Declaration stresses the "important role" of "well targeted, sustainably financed technical assistance and capacity-building programmes". It dedicates a whole section to them, and reiterates the commitment of its membership to help the weakest among them participate effectively in the multilateral trade system. What does this mean in practice? What exactly is the purpose of "trade capacity building" (TCB)? Who should provide this assistance and how? Is it all gain for developing countries, or does it entail risks? As more and more funds are earmarked for TCB, often for the benefit of countries with very low absorption capacity, recipients and donors need clear answers to these questions. Based on a recent review of trade capacity building projects administered in African and Caribbean countries, and on recent analytical work in Eastern Africa, this paper attempts to provide some elements of response[2].

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1. Voir Solignac Lecomte (2001*a*) et Bonaglia et Fukasaku (2002).

2. See Solignac Lecomte (2001*a*) and Bonaglia and Fukasaku (2002).

Trade Capacity Building: Trickier Business than it Seems?

That trade-related capacity in poor countries is extremely weak is widely acknowledged. That something needs to be done undeniably makes sense. Therefore, at first glance, strengthening the capacity of the poorest WTO members to participate in the world trade system may seem a rather straight-forward way of promoting their interests, and those of the world trade system as a whole. Looking more closely, however, it actually turns out to be quite a controversial topic. The most salient of these controversies, at least until recently, has been money: in spite of repeated pledges at the last three Ministerial meetings, actual financial commitments have remained small, and at least well below rhetoric. The setting up of the "Doha Trust Fund" and various efforts by donors, such as the European Commission (EC), are changing this situation[3].

One may want to go one step further and ask where trade-related technical assistance fits within the political economy of trade negotiations. Is it aiming at rebalancing relations in the WTO? Or is it, as some in developing countries fear, merely the promise of a sweet pill to help them swallow bitter prospects in terms of market access? Last, but certainly not least, the question of whose immediate interest should prevail deserves some attention. Should capacity building aim to widen the scope of actual economic policy choices for developing countries? Or should it be limited to helping them cope with the burden of commitments they have taken on, for the benefit of their more developed partners?

To make things worse, issues in trade-related capacity building and technical assistance (TCB) are diverse, complex and in constant evolution. For a start, the links between trade, development and poverty (through the former's impact on growth and income distribution) are not clear for everyone[4]. Moreover, the technical aspects of trade policy making in the context of the WTO and other fora are increasingly complicated — with "new" issues such as services, intellectual property, TBTs, e-commerce, etc. coming in the picture — all the more in countries where for decades trade policy mainly consisted in "granting import licenses".

As a result, there is not yet a clear common understanding among donors (or recipients) of the scope of TCB, or even more importantly of the objectives of this type of assistance. Actually, until very recently, there had been very few attempts at defining

3. The *Doha Development Agenda Global Trust Fund* was created following the WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha, in November 2001. On 11 March 2002 WTO Member Governments pledged CHF 30 million to the fund (see www.wto.org). As for the EU, in December 2000, it set aside EUR 20 million from the European Development Fund (EDF) to help the African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries (ACP) prepare and negotiate Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the EU (www.capacity.org/13/info_brief1.html). In February 2002, the EU also agreed a new programme of more than EUR 42 million to help the ACP improve their capacity to export fisheries products (see http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade/miti/devel/pr130302.htm). Several other new sources of funding from the EU and bilateral donors are being opened. A web-based database of trade-related capacity building projects operated by donors in developing countries, compiled by the OECD and the WTO, should be on line by the end of November 2002 (see www.oecd.org/dac/trade).

4. See Bussolo and Solignac Lecomte (1999); Winters (1999).

what TCB in poor countries entails, and very little practical guidance as to how capacity in that field can best be developed and strengthened. The first comprehensive attempt of that sort was made by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which published in 2001 its *Guidelines on Strengthening Trade Capacity for Development* (www.oecd.org/dac/trade)[5]. One of its virtues is an effort to look into the core of the matter: what *kind* of capacity should we aim to build or strengthen? If the answer, as the Guidelines suggest, is that a whole *process* of trade policy making must be engineered in those countries, then there is a wide scope for improvement in current TCB practices.

Fostering an Efficient Trade Policy Process

Many factors can explain why a country succeeds — or fails — in using international trade as a vehicle for its development strategy. As evidenced by the experience of countries that have succeeded — e.g. Mauritius, several East Asian developing countries, etc. — efficient trade policy making may be best described in the context of this paper as a process by which:

i) the country's *trade interests* are clearly identified, in the framework of its overall development strategy;

ii) these interests are translated into *policies and negotiating goals*;

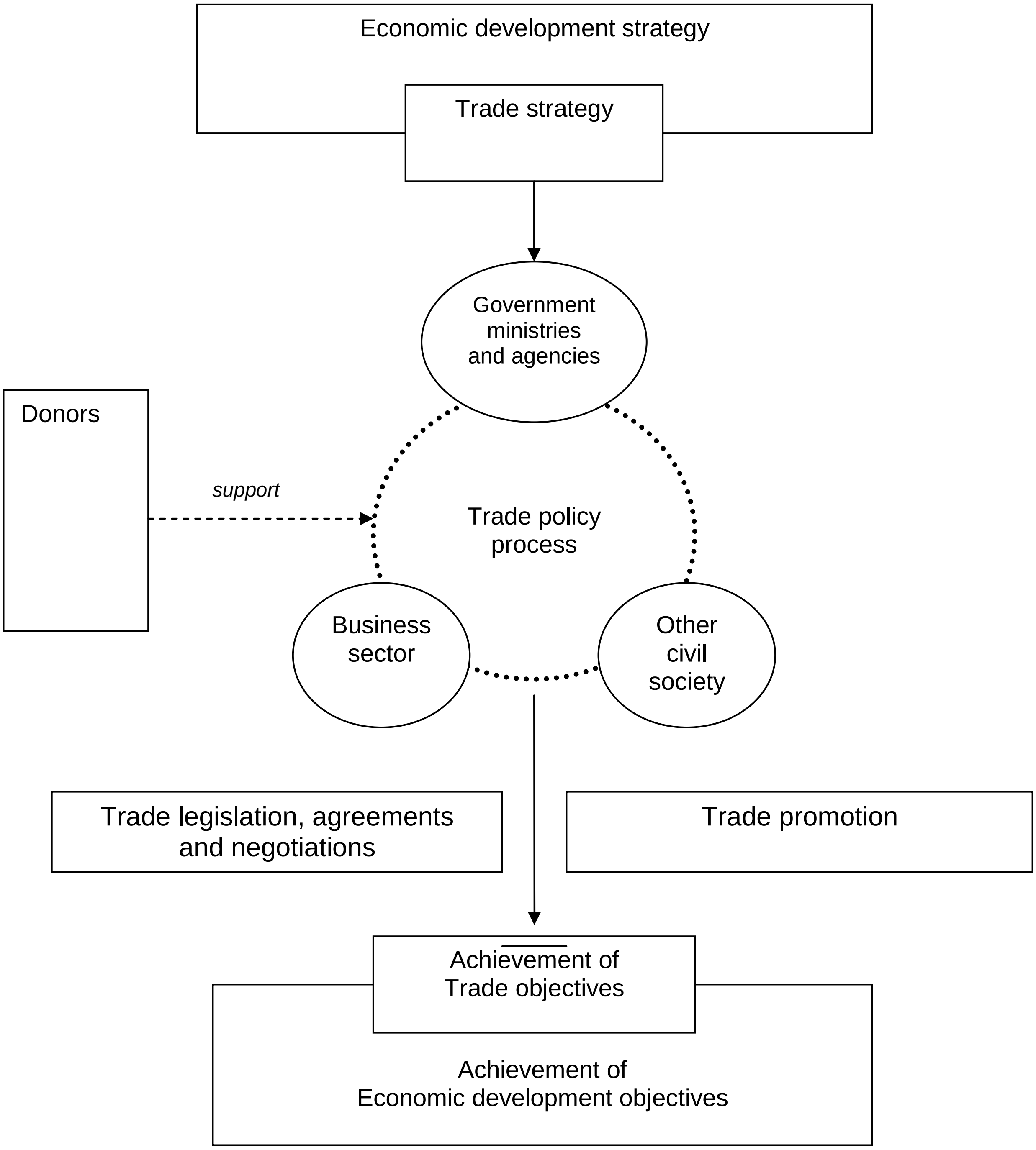
iii) *roles* are distributed — either explicitly or implicitly — and *resources* are allocated to implement these policies, and to promote these interests, reactively or actively, in the various negotiating fora (at the multilateral, bilateral and regional levels).

Best practice reveals three critical elements of an efficient trade policy process: *government leadership*, *institutional capacity* and the *inclusion* of all actors, including the relevant ministries (not just those in charge of "trade"), the business sector, trade promotion and regulation bodies, think tanks, universities and other civil society organisations.

Figure 1 depicts such a process in a very simplified manner. Importantly, it shows donors not interfering with strategies or objectives, nor in legislation or negotiations; instead, their support is focused on institutional capacity building, so as to help structure the *process*, and make it sustainable, rather than solely strengthen the capacity of individuals.

5. See also Pengelly and George (2001).

Figure 1. **The Trade Policy Process, a Simplified Sketch**



Notes:

— The trade strategy is part and parcel of the economic development strategy.

— The process requires the input of a variety of actors, and induces a permanent adjustment of objectives, negotiating goals, roles and resource allocation.

— Donors do not interfere with strategies or objectives, nor in legislation or negotiations.

— Support is focused on institutional capacity building, so as to help structure the process, and make it sustainable, rather than solely strengthen the capacity of individuals.

Supporting the structuring and the sustainability of such a process — in countries where it is inefficient or close to non existent — is what donors should aim at. Evidence shows that they do so to some extent, but generally in a dispersed manner, and very rarely with a comprehensive approach. Capacity building initiatives in the area of trade policy often aim primarily at *helping developing countries to cope with the obligations* they contracted within the trade agreements they have signed; they also mostly refer to *technical assistance and training*; and they are largely directed at *trade administrations and officials*.

What's wrong with that? Firstly, it is restrictive to describe developing countries' needs in the area of trade policy as the set of information and know-how necessary to implement the commitments made under the multilateral system, or as part of other agreements (e.g. within the ACP-EU co-operation framework). As said above, any trade agreement is necessarily a subset of a trade policy, which itself is part and parcel of a country's own development strategy. The purpose of TCB therefore necessarily depends on the country's own objectives, thus calling for particular attention to be effectively devoted to ownership and context-specificity.

Secondly, it is inadequate to consider capacity needs as merely a sum of information and know-how which are lacking, and which TCB would merely transfer from donors to recipients. Poor trade performers do not only need to learn the theory of trade policy making, but also to engage in the practice of managing information, networking with stakeholders, conducting negotiations, etc. In this context, trade related technical assistance programmes targeted at middle-rank officials will have little impact as long as awareness at higher levels and the institutional setting for trade policy making are inadequate. This will at best enhance the capacity of individuals, who may then be tempted to leave the civil service for more lucrative positions in the private sector, for instance as consultants. African trade civil servants were reported in a recent meeting as saying they were being "seminared to death" by donors[6]. Year on year, a string of seminars and training sessions for officials appear to bring together people which may benefit individually, but who are most likely not be listened to when they go back to their capitals, and who have few incentives to share the acquired knowledge within their institutions, let alone with other Ministries, private sector associations, etc. A feasibility study — conducted by the London-based Overseas Development Institute — of a scheme for building the capacity of African trade officials by out placing them temporarily to administrations in Europe, has highlighted the risks associated with de-coupling *individual* capacity development from *institutional* capacity development[7].

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6. INZET meeting organised in preparation of UNCTAD's LDC III conference, The Hague, 8 May 2001.

7. Amoaten and Solignac Lecomte (2000), *in* Solignac Lecomte (2001a).

Finally, potential beneficiaries/targets of TCB aid at the policy level include more than just the government, although the latter obviously has the central role. Indeed, "trade policy makers" arguably ceased to be a confined group — if they ever were — since international trade affects virtually all aspects of social and economic life[8].

Helping engineer an efficient, sustainable and inclusive trade policy process is not an easy task. One common shortcoming of trade capacity development projects is that they end up being biased — one way or another — in favour of donors, rather than recipients.

The Risk of Biased Aid

Capacity building in the area of trade is risky business. As the development objectives of developed countries (as donors) overlap with their commercial interests (as trading powers), they may be prone to decide upon *what type of assistance* to provide according to their own interests rather than those of the recipient countries. Four types of such biases have been identified that apply more or less exclusively to the area of trade capacity building, by contrast with other areas of development assistance.

i) *Negative discrimination*

Since competition is the name of the trade game, the efficiency of TCB is bound to be measured by the extent to which poor countries eventually increase their shares of world markets, and succeed in protecting them. This may naturally entail mirroring "losses" from developed countries (in the *mercantilist* sense). However, cases of donor projects promoting the recipient country's trade interests against their own are seldom. Understandably, donor countries may be reluctant to providing assistance to activities they perceive as hurting their own short term interests, for instance, by creating or strengthening capacity to handle anti-dumping measures taken by third countries … including donor countries themselves.

ii) *Positive discrimination*

Donors may be tempted to "positively discriminate" in favour of trade-related assistance which generates benefits for their own economies or firms, at the expense of other interventions that would generate benefits mostly for recipients. The case of agriculture exports from Maghreb countries (Morocco, Tunisia) to Europe is telling: the EU imposed countervailing taxes on some food imports from these countries during the season where European producers grow them, while using part of its financial aid and technical assistance to build green houses for counter-season production[9].

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8. The main reason for this is the gradual shift of trade regulation from border issues (mostly tariffs) to non-border issues (including TBTs, TRIMs, etc.).The point was made by A. Dunkel, during the OECD DAC's Workshop on Good practices for donors on capacity development for trade (Paris, 29-30 May 2000).

9. See Fontagné and Péridy (1997).

Multilateral Trade Rules for Consumers' Protection: the Richer, the Safer

Assistance programmes aiming at ensuring compliance with health and quality requirements for products exported to OECD markets usually leave the question of the protection of consumers *in the developing countries* un-tackled. For example, the upgrading of fisheries production processes in Senegal successfully helped accommodate EU restrictions to market access (i.e. increasingly tight safety and quality norms). Minimal safety and hygiene requirements for imported and domestically traded goods are rarely included in donors' trade-related assistance objectives. In many countries, there is little effective regulation or control — if any — of imported food products, pharmaceutical products, etc., sold and consumed locally. Capacity to monitor these issues is very scarce at the national level: some consumer associations have been set up by individuals, but lack representativity, and hardly any research, data or indicators are available.

iii) Tied Aid

In trade-related projects, good old tied aid — whereby most benefits are captured by the suppliers of equipment and technical assistance — is alive and well. Many donor-sponsored activities presented — in some cases accounted for — as development aid, see "contractors", NGOs and consultants from the donor country pocket the bulk of sometimes sizeable budgets, with little guarantee that they are the most efficient suppliers, or that the project itself actually corresponds to a priority for development. Such cases can be found, at the enterprise level, in the several schemes fostering "*North-South"* partnerships between firms, which almost systematically require for a certain amount of equipment to be purchased from a supplier of the donor country (the French "*clause d'origine"*, or purchasing requirements in Dutch or German schemes). ODA funds are still used by bilaterals for such activities under the assumption that "mutual interests" (of both parties) are pursued. While short term benefits may accrue to recipients, e.g. in the form technology transfer to a firm, the overall impact on the economy remains extremely limited. At the policy level, aid tying also surfaces in projects with a high content of built-in technical assistance from the donor country[10].

iv) Conflict of Interest

Another, less direct, potential impediment to aid efficiency in TCB is that the support granted by donors to enhance the negotiating capacity of the recipient country in various fora may alter the negotiator's goals and incentives. For a given country, efficient negotiation capacity means the capacity to formulate and defend its own trade

10. In this respect, the progress in related work by the OECD DAC is worth monitoring. After intensive discussions among DAC members and several unsuccessful earlier attempts, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) reached agreement at its high level meeting in April 2001 on a recommendation to untie Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the least developed countries. See www.oecd.org/pdf/M00006000/M00006938.pdf.

interests[11]. Being supported in this by a donor country who is also sitting at the table of negotiations (for instance in the WTO) is no less than a contradiction in terms. Let us take a look at a few examples.

— *Training.* In the run up to the Seattle Ministerial meeting in 1999, a case has been observed in Senegal where a US-funded training package for policy makers and private sector actors strongly emphasised issues which the donor country had made its own priorities (the need to do away with agricultural subsidies), while deliberately overlooking issues where the interests of Senegal may well conflict with that of the US (intellectual property rights). Similarly, the promotion by EU members of the “multi-functionality” concept — a catch-all phrase used to gather support against proponents of agricultural trade liberalisation — in the seminars given to the recipients of its aid, illustrates how blurry the border can be between assistance and propaganda.

— *Technical assistance* to administrations in charge of trade policies is arguably necessary where capacity is weak or absent, but direct support to, or involvement in drafting negotiating positions (as observed in European aid to Namibia, ahead of ACP-EU trade negotiations) contradicts the basic principle that trade policies should be owned by the country, and defined in coherence with its overall development strategy.

— *Financial support* to the ACP Secretariat in Geneva by the EC — effective from January 2002 — may arguably shift the accountability of the former further away from ACP countries towards the EC. Here again, the argument of mutual interests in the WTO between the EU members (soon to be more and more diverse as the Union expands) and the 77 ACP countries (which already represent very diverse interests in many trade areas) seems, at best, extremely weak.

All donors, not just those cited, have been faced with such problems since the early days of official development aid. They partly stem from the pressure of lobbies and vested interests within their constituencies at home, but are also arguably inherent to the nature of TCB. It is therefore necessary for partners in development co-operation to have a mature debate about them today, and jointly seek solutions, some of which we explore in the next section.

Ways Forward

If the growing funds earmarked for TCB are to support the structuring of a trade policy process in ACP countries, there is wide scope for improving the partnership between donors and recipients. We briefly look at three issues: donor co-ordination, prioritisation and the monitoring of biases in TCB. At least one crucial question is left out and will be addressed in the future by the OECD Development Centre: how to operationalise a participatory approach to trade policy making in countries with weak institutions.

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11. See the series of working papers by the Overseas Development Institute on Developing Countries' Participation in International Negotiations, at www.odi.org.uk/iedg/wps_intro.html : Page (2002); Hess (2001); and Solignac Lecomte (2001*b*).

Improving Donor Co-ordination

Donors do consult with each other in the field. Various thematical consultative meetings are regularly organised, e.g. on private-sector development, but almost never on specifically trade-focused projects. This is because few donors are involved in such projects in the first place, and the little capacity there is in country offices for economic matters rarely allows to a thorough monitoring of trade-related issues. Stepping up trade capacity building efforts, is thus arguably best done through joint programmes, operated by one or a limited number of agencies, funded by a multi-donor trust fund. A successful example is the Joint Integrated Technical Assistance Programme (JITAP), operated by the International Trade centre (ITC), UNCTAD and the WTO[12].

Setting Priorities

In small economies, the private sector is poorly organised and its formal end is limited in size; governmental institutions are weak[13]; and civil society organisations capable of being a genuine interface with small producers and consumers are few. Therefore, the number of potential participants in the trade policy process is fairly small. Besides, most of them would be the same people donors have to engage with in private sector development programmes. Actually, the poor trade performance of most ACP countries largely stems from problems of *production* (the “supply-side” issues)[14]. There is thus a strong case for considering private sector development and trade capacity building as one single objective of technical and financial assistance[15]. This would avoid duplication, the risk of which looms again as increased funding is earmarked for TCB. It would also foster the prioritisation of objectives, which is necessary since the trade and private sector development agenda is so broad, and the absorption capacity of developing countries so limited.

Monitoring Bias

Are trade-related capacity building and technical assistance so biased in essence that they eventually do more harm than good? Not necessarily. For one thing, cases were observed where donors’ assistance clearly seemed to strengthen the capacity of the recipient country to take independent views on trade issues: in Ghana, for instance, a report to the government on the implications of UEMOA’s newly implemented common external tariff turned out to be very critical of this initiative, although it was commissioned, funded and put out by the EC, itself a strong supporter of UEMOA. Similarly, in Senegal,

12. See a short description on Solignac Lecomte (2001a). See also www.jitap.org.

13. See the case of Ghana in OECD (2000).

14. See Bonaglia and Fukasaku, ibidem. See also the papers presented at the International Trade Centre Executive Forum 2002 on “Moving from Comparative to Competitive Advantage”, (www.intracen.org/execforum/ef2002/papers.htm).

15. This point was raised at an OECD/ECA regional workshop on Trade Capacity Building in Mombassa, Kenya (26-27 August 2002). See www.oecd.org/dac/trade.

France funded the provision of some material to prepare the Seattle Ministerial WTO meeting, which was put together by the FAO and by independent researchers and did not necessarily reflect France's positions or interests. Finally, in the run up to the ACP-EU negotiations, research commissioned by the EU to independent institutions, has been deemed useful by ACP experts and negotiators, due to their demand-led and neutral nature[16].

Besides, while some bias in TCB may seem unavoidable, there is scope for reducing, or at least monitoring it. For instance, provisions are made by some donors in technical assistance contracts to ensure that the material produced to support negotiating strategies remains confidential to the recipient government. Similar provisions remain to be defined on technical assistance content, or on rules for the use of ODA funds in TCB projects.

At the end of the day, consensus needs to be built among donors on the purpose of TCB. There can be only one ultimate objective: to *empower* developing countries in the multilateral trade system, and help their products penetrate OECD and other world markets. It is in the interest of donors to have informed trade partners to negotiate with, just as it is in their interest that developing countries trade more.

As for the recipients' side, it was argued by several trade officials that the best antidotes to biased TCB assistance were awareness and leadership: where trade interests and related objectives are clearly identified at the country level in the first place, the room for third parties to unduly influence trade policy lessens considerably.

TCB: Not Too Little, but Not Too Much

So we need fairer and better TCB, and there are ways of getting it. But how solid is the case for TCB altogether? With poverty alleviation heralded as the overarching goal of international co-operation, TCB arguably has a "legitimacy problem". Most donors are indeed struggling to reconcile trade and investment promotion programmes with the development and poverty alleviation agenda. Seeking immediate returns from TCB programmes in terms of poverty alleviation is not the answer and can even be counterproductive. Dissipating the mixed feelings on the role of TCB is therefore important: provided attention is paid to some critical risks, of which this article tries to highlight a few, it can legitimately help developing countries improve the coherence and impact of their development policies, and ultimately improve the lives of poor communities and individuals. Conversely, it is crucial to consider what the potential consequences of *not* strengthening the capacity of poor countries to trade are for the poor.

Nevertheless, for the TCB case to be made convincingly, it must be recognised that, while the positive impact of trade liberalisation and export promotion on growth and income distribution in the medium to long term are fairly well established, the direct and indirect links between trade policy and poverty at the micro level are less clear in the short run. Short term impacts must be carefully anticipated in the inception phase of such

16. Gonzales, Page and Tekere (2000).

programmes. More importantly, as the development challenges confronting poor countries are many, it is critical to pay attention to the balance of resources that they should mobilise to address them. A risk actually exists of putting too much emphasis on trade and investment at the expense of other sectors. In the words of Dani Rodrik:

> "By focusing on international integration, governments in poor nations divert human resources, administrative capabilities, and political capital away from more urgent development priorities such as education, public health, industrial capacity, and social cohesion"[17].

A much quoted figure in this regard is the cost that poor countries would have to bear in order to implement WTO requirements under three of its agreements[18], which World Bank trade economist Michael Finger estimated at $150 million, i.e. the equivalent of a year's development budget for many LDCs… This is clearly not feasible, nor desirable. As summed up by another World Bank official: "the aim is not to over-emphasise the importance of trade, but to make sure it is not neglected"[19].

17. Rodrik (2001).

18. On customs valuation, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and trade-related intellectual property rights.

19. Presentation of the Integrated Framework at the Business Roundtable organised by ITC, during the LDC III conference in Brussels (16/05/01).

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