

ECA and UNCTAD Course Highlighted Key Issues on International Economic Agenda

ECA Press Release No. 10/2009

Cairo, Egypt, 23 Feb 2009 – Better understanding of the infrastructure necessary to foster competitiveness and the relevance of transportation to trade and key issues in international trade negotiations and regionalism were the focus of the United Nations Economic Commission on Africa's (UNECA) presentations during a three-week workshop held recently.

The 16th Regional Course on Key Issues on the International Economic Agenda took place from 25 January to 12 February in Cairo, Egypt. The workshop's overall objective was to raise awareness of the relevance of the channels and mechanisms used by international trade transactions and how they could contribute to improve competitiveness in their countries.

Twenty-six participants from 20 African countries attended the course. The participants had a broad range of professional background and included representatives of ministries of trade and industry, ministries of external relations and regional integration, ministries of economic development, university lecturers and researchers from development institutes, banks, and trade boards.

The course was organized by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Trade, Finance and Economic Development Division (TFED) and the African Trade Policy Centre (ATPC) of the ECA collaborated with UNCTAD in the delivery of the course.

ECA contributed to the course by providing training on two modules: Trade Logistics, Transport and Trade Facilitation; and International Trade and Development. Other modules of the course included: Trade, Financial Systems, Microeconomic policies and Development in a Globalizing Economy; Foreign Direct Investment and Enterprise Development; The Knowledge Economy – Key Policy Issues; and Simulation Exercise on Trade in Tourism Services.

The presentations in the Trade Logistics, Transport and Trade Facilitation Module introduced participants to key issues in trade logistics and in transport and trade facilitation, with emphasis on Africa. Presentations covered several topics including environment building for trade, global transport networks and transport infrastructure and services, and the use of information technologies in trade transactions, as a management tool for transport systems and as a core customs clearance administration structure. Special emphasis was placed on trade facilitation measures presently being negotiated at the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The ECA made presentations on the Trans-African Highways (TAH) and other regional corridors in Africa; institutional arrangements for regional transport corridors; and a regional perspective of trade facilitation. The presentation on TAH highlighted the importance of regional transport networks, provided a history of regional networks in Africa, and examined the key features of TAH. It also described other major transit transport corridors in Africa, analysed the constraints to the development of regional infrastructure and made recommendations for the way forward. The second presentation explained in detail the legal and institutional frameworks for corridor management, using concrete examples from across Africa. It also outlined various governance arrangements and funding options for corridor management institutions.

The third presentation defined trade facilitation, and explained its context as well as key related issues in Africa, including high transport costs, complicated customs procedures, inadequate use of information and communication technology, inefficient international payment mechanisms, and difficulties in meeting international trade standards. Trade facilitation negotiations at the WTO and the Aid for Trade initiative were also discussed, with emphasis that they provide new opportunities to tackling barriers to trade in Africa.

The objective of the International Trade and Development Module which ECA made a contribution to was to provide the participants with insights of several GATT and WTO agreements, particularly from the developmental perspective; the importance of the multilateral trading system; the rights and obligations of WTO members; the Doha work programme (DWP); and the development interface of multilateralism and regionalism. The ECA made four presentations. The first presentation focused on the main issues of interest for developing countries in the agriculture negotiations. The presentation covered the major concepts and issues in the agriculture negotiations in the WTO. Specific African examples were provided. During the discussions, the participants to identify what ideas for the way forward in the WTO negotiations. The second presentation looked at the opportunities and challenges in the WTO non-agriculture market access (NAMA) negotiations. Simulation results looking at the implications of the modalities currently being negotiated, using African countries as examples were presented and discussed.

The third and fourth presentations by the ECA were on the topic of regional integration negotiations and their importance in the trade expansion of African countries. The main thrust here was to introduce the participants to the importance African countries attach to their participation in sub-regional and regional trade agreements, and how they can further benefit from the regional economic communities. More importantly, the interface between the regional economic communities and the Economic Partnership Agreements raised a lot of discussion points.

At the end of the presentations, participants said they had a better understanding of the role of institutional and physical trade infrastructure in fostering trade competitiveness in terms of supporting productive and trading capacities and on the international economic issues with respect to trade negotiations. They also acknowledged that they had a better grasp of the relevance of trade and transport facilitation and the importance of information technologies in trade transactions at both national and international levels. They expressed their appreciation to the use of examples of the implications for African countries in the trade negotiations.

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