

Interviews with Geneva-Based Organizations

Princeton Survey Research Associates International was retained by the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank to conduct in-depth interviews to assist in the assessment of the Bank's work in the area of global trade and trade negotiations. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with individuals associated with negotiations of the World Trade Organization in Geneva and Bern, Switzerland, between March 17 and March 24, 2005. The one-on-one interviews took place with high-level WTO officials, ambassadors to the WTO, and professional staff members from country delegations and ancillary organizations. Those interviewed represented a good distribution of people from developing and industrial countries.

The objectives of the interviews were to:

- (i) Assess perception of the World Bank's work on trade, in view of its advocacy objectives.
- (ii) Obtain views on the World Bank's strategy for trade.
- (iii) Capture the most effective Bank products and sources of information for advocacy.

Background

Almost without exception, those interviewed had a detailed and thoughtful knowledge of trade and trade negotiations. Most believe trade has been and will continue to be an engine of economic improvement. They point to global trade growing at a faster rate than the world economy overall. However, there is some fear among the least-developed countries as they see preferences eroding, and a push to get them to liberalize their trade policies without sufficient help in transforming their economies.

Everyone associated with the WTO realizes the critical stage of the negotiations with important benchmarks over the summer, a crucial meeting at the end of the year in Hong Kong, and final talks next year. There is a great deal of uncertainty on whether the goals will be achieved, and opinions range from very optimistic to very pessimistic.

Perceptions of the World Bank

The Bank is seen as a key organization that has the resources and the standing to generate necessary research relating to the talks. The Bank's increased attention to trade in recent years is also viewed positively. High praise is given to the Bank office in Geneva, which is viewed as accessible and responsive.

On a more critical note, most of the people interviewed talked of a disconnect between the Bank's work and its practical application. There is fairly wide agreement that the Bank's research often lacks a strong correlation with current negotiations, and with what is actually happening within countries. As part of the criticism, it was often mentioned that the Bank only works "top-down" and does not consult or partner with others while producing research.

Almost all assume that the Bank has a role in trade and trade negotiations. The type of research currently being conducted is seen as a primary role of the Bank. In addition, a larger role in applicable and topical research is desired, and most would like to see the Bank's lending practices more tied to their trade work. Infrastructure and transitioning costs in countries attempting to modernize their trade economies were frequently mentioned as areas where Bank resources could be of great assistance.

The Bank is viewed as having an agenda that pushes trade liberalization. This is generally seen

as positive by industrial countries and WTO officials, but somewhat negatively by developing countries and some nongovernmental organizations that work with the developing world. Despite the perceived predisposition, just about everyone still appreciates Bank research.

Several individuals mentioned the need for the Bank to recognize the importance of regional trade agreements. With the length of time it takes to produce a global trade pact, they say it is natural that countries will seek regional agreements. They wish the Bank would give more time and effort to researching the impact of these agreements, and help countries determine whether these regional agreements are to their benefit or detriment.

The Bank is seen as too often taking a “one-size-fits-all” approach to trade. Developing countries wished to be seen as full partners, to be included at every stage of the Bank’s research and lending policy.

Two ambassadors to the WTO had little to no knowledge of the World Bank’s work on trade in Geneva. They assumed that the Bank’s work in trade was tangential at best, and was only evident in Bank lending policies. These individuals were not only unaware of the Bank’s office dealing with trade in Geneva, but were largely unaware of the research and data developed by the Bank on trade. It is not possible to extrapolate how many ambassadors might have the same low level of knowledge, but it is a cautionary note: there is a segment of delegations that is unaware of the Bank’s work on trade.

The World Bank Strategy

The Bank’s stated strategy on trade—as supporting development—was generally applauded by those interviewed. Only a small minority believe that trade does not have a role in development. Their position is that the WTO is an organization whose mission is to liberalize trade, which will help the economy overall, but there is no guarantee (nor should there be) that trade will help developing countries. For most, their only criticism of the strategy is a perceived disconnect between the stated strategy and a push toward liberalization that does not always account for the interim stages developing countries

go through, or the transitional adjustment they may face.

Integration of trade as a core aspect of country development strategies is seen as being on point. The importance of making trade work with all the other aspects of development within a country is seen as critical to a successful, comprehensive approach. In line with the Bank’s strategy of integration, most give the Bank a great deal of credit for developing and taking the lead on the Integrated Framework for Trade-Related Technical Assistance. They see the Integrated Framework approach of having all of the major organizations working together toward one policy for a given country as a major advance. However, the high expectations accompanying the Integrated Framework leave some fearful that the Bank will stop at the stage of diagnosis, and not follow through with actions to fix the problems identified.

The vast majority believes that, taken together, the Bank’s strategy of promoting changes in the world trading system to make it supportive of development on a global level, especially for the poorest of the developing countries, and integrating trade at the country level are exactly the correct focus areas for the World Bank. Most often the only suggestion for making the strategy stronger is to add the inclusion of countries as partners in the process, and realize the uniqueness of each country in developing their specific strategy.

In the current world of trade preferences, tariffs, and internal subsidies, many worry that while the Bank says it is supportive of development, the least developed countries will suffer from the Bank’s push toward liberalization. They want to see the Bank work with these countries on strategies—tailored for the specific country—that provide contingencies for the inevitable dislocations their economies will experience as they move more into a world of lower trade barriers.

Many understand the Bank’s reluctance to get into areas viewed as political, and they see the possibility of the Bank losing standing in the trade and development community if it attempts to tackle all of the areas that are criticized. Nevertheless, most often mentioned is the need for work on ad valorem tariffs. This work is seen as critical in the current negotiations, and the

Bank is viewed as a neutral source with the resources to work on this issue. While some view the ad valorem issue as too political for Bank involvement, others say that *because* the issue has become so political, the World Bank is needed to step in and provide an impartial formula to cut through the current complexity.

Products and Information

A theme heard throughout the interviews and relayed in this report is the high quality of the research done by the Bank. The Bank is viewed as having some of the most respected people in the area of trade and trade negotiations working on its staff. Trips to Geneva to discuss recent research are appreciated by all. For the most part, the work produced by the Bank is well regarded by the trade community in Geneva. There is wide diversity of opinion regarding which reports are of the most use.

The annual *Global Economic Prospects* reports that focus on trade were mentioned more than any other Bank report. These reports are viewed as long-term reference material. Beyond this series, there is a range of opinion on what specific studies are particularly useful. There is a consensus that in their busy lives, a strong summary of the document is particularly helpful. Also, many continue to point out they would like to see the Bank move beyond its analytical, one-step-removed mode of operating to a mode that includes countries early in the process of deciding which topic to research, doing the actual research, and the write-ups and implementation of the research.

Most appreciate both the longer in-depth research that they use as reference material and the shorter, more focused reports. Most are over-

whelmed with paperwork, and a short, focused, area-specific report is viewed by many as ideal. Again, work that is not country-specific and practical enough is an often-heard criticism. A role partially filled by the Bank, and seen as critical, is helping individuals identify the specific Bank research that would be helpful to them.

It was often mentioned that it is appreciated when trade information is written into individual country reports. A fairly frequent criticism is that the Bank charges for reports. Many would like to be able to access this information on the Internet, or receive the reports/data for free. The Bank is seen to be working at cross-purposes: that it attempts to disseminate its findings, yet charges for those findings.

There is uneven use of the World Bank's Web site as a means of accessing trade information. Several say it is the first place they would go if they needed trade data and that they find the site easy to navigate. Others profess a lack of time or ability to wade through the information.

Meetings and seminars are viewed as important tools for the trade community in Geneva to keep abreast of the Bank's work. Those interviewed are particularly grateful when reports still in development are discussed with them. These meetings are seen as one of the few opportunities for those outside the Bank to have a small influence on its work. A minority say they are usually too busy to attend these meetings.

A sizeable number of those interviewed have personal contacts within the Bank. These individual contacts are seen as very useful in accessing Bank resources. Bank personnel are generally viewed as helpful, with more assistance seen as coming from staff directly involved in trade, and slightly less from the operational side.