

Summary Report on the Meeting of South Asian Countries' Missions in Geneva

CUTS Geneva Resource Centre Conference Room – 16 March 2009

This meeting was held as a follow up to the SAFIT (South Asia Forum on International Trade) II meeting held on 13 January 2009 entitled “South Asia: Stakes and Role in the Global Trading System – Doha Round and Beyond,” during which a wide interest for CUTS facilitating discussions on South Asian issues in Geneva was expressed. All eight South Asian Missions in Geneva were invited. Except Maldives and Bhutan, all others were represented.

The meeting began with an introduction of the CUTS Geneva Resource Center (CUTS GRC) and its ideas about what role it might play in the discussions of South Asian approaches to the Global Trading System (GTS) and other important trade issues. Representatives from the missions of South Asian countries were then asked to provide their thoughts on the role they would like CUTS GRC to fulfil in trade and development discussions within and beyond Geneva. All participants gratefully recognized this initiative taken by CUTS GRC to organize meetings of South Asian countries in Geneva as a positive step and wanted this effort to continue regularly and periodically. Following is a summary of the main points of the discussion as well as the decisions taken in the meeting:

1. A number of issues were mentioned where South Asian Geneva delegates would benefit from work by CUTS. These included: Aid for Trade, services including mode 4, market access, climate change and the environment, agriculture, preferences, TRIPS-CBD relationship, non-tariff barriers, fisheries subsidies, RTAs, trade facilitation, and standards. Since half of South Asian countries were LDCs, issues of relevance to them should be a priority for work by CUTS. In addition to these “Geneva issues” CUTS may also undertake country-specific research studies on trade and development while taking into account the specific cultural considerations of each South Asian country. Similarly research and analysis on the intra-SAARC and extra-SAARC trade potential of the region could be pursued including on issues such as infrastructure development, harmonisation of standards, and transit facilitation.
2. CUTS GRC could provide a forum for South Asian Geneva missions to brainstorm on these and other issues engendering exchanges of ideas and facilitating a platform for the region in Geneva. South Asian countries may not have common positions on all issues in the WTO, but creating a common understanding on an issue can be an equally important outcome of such interactions. Where common understanding does not come out clearly during the debate, CUTS GRC could further research with a view to clarify the issue. Thus, coordinated discussion facilitated by CUTS GRC can generate appreciation across South Asian countries of each other’s interests. In terms of modalities for the future, it was suggested that CUTS GRC should prepare and send issue papers on selected topics in advance of the meeting so that a more informed debate can take place.

3. CUTS GRC summarized its role in relation to trade and development of this region in three categories. Firstly, CUTS GRC can facilitate having a regular discussion forum for South Asian countries in Geneva on trade issues. CUTS can organise quarterly meetings. Secondly, CUTS GRC can facilitate examination of South Asian interests for feeding them into the WTO negotiation process. Based on demands from these countries, CUTS can undertake an analysis of issues arising in forthcoming meetings to provide more substance from a South Asian perspective to possible interventions by the delegates in WTO meetings. Thirdly, CUTS GRC can contribute to the study of other topics relevant for the South Asian region.
4. It was agreed to hold quarterly meetings of South Asian Geneva delegates at CUTS GRC. Each meeting will focus on a topic to be selected on the basis of its “timeliness” (e.g., link to an imminent WTO meeting), and the level of understanding of the issue among South Asian Geneva delegates. CUTS GRC will prepare and circulate before the meeting a short note on the selected issue. Accordingly it was decided that the next meeting to be held in June 2009 should focus on Aid for Trade taking into account the scheduled WTO Global Review on Aid for Trade in early July 2009 as well as the importance of this issue for South Asian countries.