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Report on Meeting

Signing Ceremony of the Agreement Establishing AITIC as an Intergovernmental Organisation

(held at the Centre William Rappard, Geneva, on 9 December 2002)

I. Introduction

1. On 9 December 2002, representatives from developed, developing and least-developed members and observers of the WTO, as well as officials from trade-related organisations and other intergovernmental organisations¹ participated in the signing ceremony of the **AITIC Agreement**. This agreement transformed the status of the Agency for International Trade Information and Cooperation into that of an intergovernmental organisation (IGO).

2. This event represents the culmination of **the AITIC Initiative on Trade-Related Capacity Building and Greater Participation in the International Trading System**, signed by 55 ministers in Doha in November 2001 at the Fourth Session of the WTO Ministerial Conference. This followed on from a series of discussions initiated by Geneva-based representatives keen to consider the various options available for developing AITIC in such a way as to increase its effectiveness and

¹ Algeria, Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Cape Verde, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Finland, Gabon, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Haiti, Honduras, Ireland, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Macao (China), Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mexico, Mongolia, Nepal, the Netherlands, Panama, Paraguay, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Slovak Republic, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Togo, Tonga, Tunisia, Uganda, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Yugoslavia, Zambia, Zimbabwe. Among the international organisations, the AIF (*l'Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie*), the International Trade Centre, UNCTAD, the ACP Group, the WTO and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

enable it to respond to the growing number of calls for assistance from less-advantaged countries² (LACs).

3. Following the approval of this Initiative, a Task Force³ was set up to examine the feasibility of transforming AITIC into an IGO, or to improve AITIC's infrastructure both financially and operationally by any other means. The Task Force produced a report advocating that AITIC be established as an IGO, which was adopted in Monterrey in March 2002 by representatives from LACs and developed countries at the United Nations International Conference on Financing Development. The Task Force was then required to produce a draft Intergovernmental Agreement establishing AITIC as an IGO. This was finalised on 5 November 2002.

II. The Signing Ceremony

4. Mr David Syz, Secretary of State for Economic Affairs of Switzerland, presided over the meeting. He welcomed participants and remarked how pleased he was at there being so many in attendance. He began by recalling the creation of AITIC in 1998 at the initiative of the Swiss government in order to help LACs to defend their trading interests more effectively. He then outlined the various stages in the transformation of the Agency into an IGO and expressed satisfaction at the swiftness of the process, bearing in mind that a year after the launch of the initiative the Agreement establishing AITIC was already ready for signature. The Secretary of State drew attention to the fact that the new organisation would take effect as soon as three beneficiary members and three members providing financial backing had ratified the Agreement submitted for signature that day, and made it known that the Agreement would be open for signature until 31 December 2003. The governments present then accepted the establishment of a Preparatory Committee, presided over by HE Dr Rénaud Clérismé (Haiti) and Mr Didier Chambovey (Switzerland), destined to oversee the transition of AITIC from its present status to that of IGO.

5. Mr Syz then handed over to HE Dr Rénaud Clérismé, the Ambassador of Haiti and Co-Chair of the AITIC Task Force. The latter thanked the Swiss government for having launched and supported the AITIC Initiative and stressed the importance of the services provided by the Agency to the neediest countries. He also stressed the fact that AITIC's transformation was occurring at a crucial moment, namely when LACs had a greater need than ever for increased technical assistance. The speaker concluded by paying tribute to the seven countries providing financial backing.⁴

6. Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi, Director General of the WTO, then took the floor and underlined the very active role played by AITIC in supporting WTO member countries and observers from LACs, and in particular those without permanent

² The Less-Advantaged Countries (LACs) are the 49 Least-Developed Countries as defined by the United Nations, several low- and middle-income developing countries, and several economies in transition. This is not a category defined by the WTO; it is simply practical to state in three words what would normally require a much longer definition.

³ The Task Force was presided over by HE Dr Rénaud Clérismé (Permanent Representative of Haiti to the WTO) and Mr Didier Chambovey (Minister, Deputy Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the WTO). It convened on 17 occasions between 17 December 2001 and 26 November 2002.

⁴ That is to say Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

representation in Geneva. In this regard, he stressed that the Agency had successfully complemented the technical activities initiated by the WTO Secretariat. He explained that providing LACs with additional and concerted assistance would enable them to participate more actively in multilateral trade negotiations. Dr Panitchpakdi stressed that the WTO would continue to strengthen its cooperation with AITIC and welcomed the latter into the fold of intergovernmental trade-related organisations. He concluded by praising the Director.

7. Mr J.-D. Bélisle, Executive Director of the International Trade Centre (ITC), warmly congratulated AITIC, its Director and her team. According to Mr Bélisle, it is the pertinent nature of AITIC's mandate which has enabled it, in such a short space of time, to carve a niche for itself and build a solid reputation among trade-related organisations based in Geneva. Mr Bélisle added that the ITC was already looking forward to working and collaborating more closely with AITIC.

8. Ms Lakshmi Puri, Director of UNCTAD's Division of International Trade in Goods and Services and Commodities, spoke on behalf of the Secretary General of UNCTAD, Mr Rubens Ricupero. She stressed the importance of AITIC's activities, supporting the LACs, in particular the least-developed countries (LDCs), and enabling their voice to be heard within the WTO. She expressed satisfaction with regard to the Memorandum of Understanding signed in February 2002 by AITIC and her organisation, and the joint activities which had already been organised. She also stressed UNCTAD's strong commitment to an even closer collaboration with the Agency. Ms Puri concluded by wishing the new organisation success.

9. The Director of AITIC, Ms Esperanza Durán took the floor to manifest her gratitude to the Swiss authorities and to thank all those present at the ceremony marking a new beginning for AITIC. She restated the importance of strengthening the multilateral trading system and underscored the fact that many countries lacked financial and human resources, thus denting their effectiveness in the multilateral trading system. She stressed that AITIC, whilst it constituted only one link in the technical assistance and capacity building process, it would play its part seriously and responsibly and would be equal to any new challenges, bridging the gap between those who act and those who watch. Ms Durán also insisted on how important it was for AITIC to continue its collaboration with sister organisations and officials from the various secretariats based in Geneva, Europe or in capitals.

10. The views of LDCs were expressed through the representatives from Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Djibouti, Madagascar, Mauritania, Nepal, Senegal, Sudan and Zambia. The latter thanked all those responsible for AITIC's transformation, which was an auspicious event for LACs and expressed their thanks to the financial backers. They pointed out that the ceremony marked the culmination of several years of intense, practical and beneficial work for the LDCs. The speakers pointed out that the countries they represented were more determined than ever to be better integrated into the multilateral trading system by participating more actively in WTO negotiations. They were equally convinced that AITIC's transformation into an IGO would enable them to reach this goal more effectively. In this respect, they referred to the important role played by the Agency among those organisations actively involved in technical assistance, before underlining that AITIC's new status would further strengthen the LDCs confidence in and support for the Agency.

11. Representatives from developing countries and the smaller more vulnerable economies, such as Barbados, Bolivia, Honduras and Mauritius, then went on to express their delight that the long process towards the transformation of AITIC into an IGO had finally been completed. They hoped that the beneficial collaboration between their countries and AITIC would continue and grow stronger. They explained that the ceremony was living proof that the road to sustainable development was only possible via increased collaboration between developed and less-advantaged countries.

12. The representatives from Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden stated their sense of fulfilment and celebrated their being among the founding sponsoring members, along with Denmark and Switzerland. The Dutch representative stressed the essential role played by capacity building in establishing an equitable multilateral trading system. Ireland's representative explained how essential it was to help the neediest countries to improve their negotiating capacity within the WTO, especially since development was central to the Doha Work Programme. The Swedish representative stressed that establishing AITIC as an IGO represented a very important step in that direction, since the Agency had the necessary experience to assist those countries requesting its services to identify their needs and promote their interests. As for the Finnish representative, he pointed out that the AITIC Agreement was a response to an urgent need for technical cooperation. Finally, the representative from the United Kingdom remarked that AITIC's new statute would enable it to convince those countries that had not so far availed themselves of the Agency's services, to do so in future.

13. The representatives from Australia and Canada stressed the essential nature of the role played by AITIC in the area of technical cooperation and capacity building. They explained that this was the reason for their governments' voluntary contributions to specific projects (technical assistance to the Pacific Islands and capacity building for non-resident francophone LDCs respectively). They would continue to collaborate closely with the Agency.

14. Following these speeches, representatives from the various countries were invited to sign the Agreement. To date, seven countries have initialled the Agreement in their capacity as members providing financial backing, whilst fourteen have done so as participating members. In addition, during the ceremony, Bangladesh, Djibouti, Honduras, Madagascar and Tonga committed to signing in the near future.