

WTO BRIEFING NOTE

3 December – the final day and what happens next.

This briefing note is designed to help journalists and the public understand developments in the Seattle Ministerial Conference. While every effort has been made to ensure the contents are accurate, it does not prejudice member governments' positions.

THE 3 DECEMBER DISCUSSIONS

Informal meetings continued through the night of December 2 and into December 3. The main discussions were in meetings in which some 20-40 ministers took part. The people attending these meetings varied according to subject, and the chairpeople did their utmost to ensure that participants represented a cross-section of the members' positions on the relevant subjects.

Progress was reported in a number of areas, but by late afternoon it was clear that there was too little time left to complete the work of narrowing the gaps, bringing the draft declaration back to the plenary working groups, making any additional changes arising from the working groups and then approving the declaration by consensus. The conference had simply run out of time.

TIME OUT

Conference chairperson Charlene Barshefsky, the US Trade Representative, told ministers at the concluding plenary session: "We found as time passed that divergences of opinion remained that would not be overcome rapidly. Our collective judgment, shared by the [WTO] Director-General, the Working Group Chairs and Co-Chairs, and the membership generally, was that it would be best to take a time out, consult with one another, and find creative means to finish the job."

She added: "During this time, the Director-General can consult with delegations and discuss creative ways in which we might bridge the remaining areas in which consensus does not yet exist, develop an improved process which is both efficient and fully inclusive, and prepare the way for successful conclusion."

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

WTO Director-General Mike Moore said in a [press statement](#) issued on 8 December: "I feel particular disappointment because the postponement of our deliberations means the benefits that would have accrued to developing and least-developed countries will now be delayed, while the problems facing these countries will not be allayed. A package of results is within reach.

"The Chairperson of the Seattle Ministerial Conference has directed me to 'consult with delegations and discuss creative ways in which we might bridge the remaining areas in which consensus does not yet exist, develop an improved process which is both efficient and fully inclusive, and prepare the way for successful conclusion.' That is what I shall do."

Many of the discussions will take place informally over the coming weeks and possibly months. More formally, the WTO General Council is scheduled to meet on 17 December when "after Seattle" issues are on the agenda. Whatever happens, members have already agreed – and written into current WTO agreements – that talks in agriculture and services will start in the beginning of 2000. Whether they will then want to add other topics, or complete the agenda that was under discussion in Seattle, and if so when, remains to be seen.