

## + All eyes on WTO's new leader

Will the first woman, African national deliver on development agenda?

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Expectations of India and other developing countries are running high on Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the first woman and African national to be appointed as the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation, as poorer countries seek flexibility in trade rules, especially to deal with the pandemic.

Developing countries will keenly watch how Okonjo-Iweala, former Finance Minister of Nigeria and World Bank economist, handles the development agenda of the WTO, including special and differential (S&D) treatment provisions being challenged by developed nations and the proposal for temporary waiver of TRIPS obligations put forward by India and South Africa, say experts.

### 'Development economist'

"She is coming at a critical time when the Covid-19 pandemic has caused major dis-



Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala AFP

ruptions and recovery for countries, especially poor nations, is on the line. Their expectations from her are high also because she is a development economist and understands development constraints," pointed out Biswajit Dhar, Professor, JNU. Dhar pointed out that while the WTO Secretariat does not interfere in decision making, it is well known that it plays an important role in WTO matters and in case of a deadlock between the developed and developing countries on certain issues, it may step in.

"One expects that under her leadership, the WTO will give due consideration to the development needs and allow S&D provisions to be implemented including in the on-going negotiations

for disciplining fisheries subsidies," he said. The priority is to get a TRIPS waiver to ensure better access to Covid-19 vaccines for poor nations, a proposal which has got the support of a large number of countries, including in Africa. "India can work with her (the new DG) to make some headway on this issue as it is clear to all that if developing countries and LDCs do not get adequate access to the vaccine, it will not be possible to get back to the new normal," Dhar said.

While expectations are high, some have their fingers crossed over whether she will actually be able to deliver on the development agenda as there would be fierce opposition from many rich nations.

### Tough tasks ahead

"The general perception amongst many developing countries is that the past director-generals have not been objective. They have bent in favour of developed countries. Let us hope she is an exception. She comes at a time when challenges are enormous starting from the Appellate Body crisis to attempts being made by certain na-

tions to push negotiations in e-commerce and investment facilitation," said Abhijit Das from the Centre for WTO Studies.

Echoing Dhar's concerns, Third World Network's Ranja Sengupta said that being from a developing country, one hoped Okonjo-Iweala will look after the interests of marginalised countries and constituencies rather than the interests of big powers as her predecessor had done.

Indicating her reportedly closeness to the current US administration, Sengupta said that it needed to be seen if she would convince the US to support a more development friendly position at the WTO, starting with delivering on S&D.

The Trump regime had blocked Okonjo-Iweala's appointment in October 2020 as the WTO DG despite strong endorsements from almost all members, including the EU and India.

The Biden-Harris administration, however, extended US support to Okonjo-Iweala this week following which the South Korean Trade Minister Yoo Myung-hee withdrew from the race.