

As a result, follow-up meetings in September at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, and early October at the IPU secretariat in Geneva, were required to develop a shared framework for discussions. Parliamentarians in Doha will meet November 11, on the basis of a joint invitation from the European Parliament and the IPU (in collaboration with two regional bodies, the Latin American Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe).

These preliminary decisions have proved difficult precisely because of the differences of views on the appropriate role for parliamentarians. Boiled down, one point of view, championed by the group led by the EuroParliamentarians, would see parliamentarians participate in some sort of permanent parliamentary assembly which, although having only consultative powers, would be representative of world citizenry and would play a role as a "parallel" deliberative body in bringing public concerns to the present intergovernmental structures.

The alternative, more minimalist conception, championed by the IPU and WTO senior officials, would provide national parliamentarians with a more long-distance relationship with the WTO. Rather than a permanent standing body, the IPU favors a "parliamentary dimension" animated by occasional international meetings. According to the IPU declaration this June, "Parliamentary oversight at home keeps governments accountable, and through them, the international trade agreements they negotiate. Parliamentary involvement can also help make the trading system . . . more widely understood and supported." In other words, parliamentarians can play a useful role "selling" WTO agreements to a skeptical public as long as they leave the difficult negotiations and debates to governments and their diplomats.

NGOs have a stake in the outcome of this debate as well. Most would welcome a well-structured parliamentary assembly not only for reasons of principle, i.e. the contribution it would make toward democratising WTO affairs. More pragmatically, a parliamentary dimension to the WTO's work would provide a badly needed public forum, allowing NGOs to work with parliamentarians to air their concerns over the range of trade-related issues which have for good reason aroused concern among NGOs and broad sections of public opinion. Furthermore, just as NGOs would welcome a well-structured parliamentary assembly, they have good reason to oppose a weak parliamentary forum. They fear that WTO officials would cite their "consultations" with elected parliamentarians as an excuse to avoid extending participation rights at the WTO to civil society representatives.

The Draft Declaration circulated early in October by the WTO Chairman of the General Council and Director-General provides very few starting points to advance debate on these, and other, transparency issues. The Draft Declaration makes only passing references to the need for "a better public understanding of the WTO" and "improved dialogue with the public."

On the brighter side, there is no need for all the complexities related to parliamentary involvement to be reconciled by the end of the Qatar Ministerial. The next step in this debate need consist only in finding a formula for moving the discussions on a parliamentary dimension more formally within the intergovernmental post-Qatar agenda. As long as acceptable language can be included in the Qatar Declaration and Programme of Action, then discussions can proceed on a more official level