

Foreword

The growing openness and democratisation of global rule-based trade governance structures have lessened the acceptability of, and reliance on, the overt deployment of power in the pursuit of national commercial interests. Therefore, as states seek to promote their economic interests and advance the welfare and security of their peoples, they are relying instead on diplomacy, negotiation, advocacy and litigation. This de-emphasising of power as the underlying determinant of the outcomes of competitive engagement and interaction among countries should be good for developing countries, which are often weaker than their negotiating partners. These changes should make it possible for developing countries to succeed in advancing their interests, even in the face of opposition from stronger states.

The last quarter of a century, an era of unparalleled globalisation of trade and systemic change, has seen different players, most notably the larger advanced developing countries, increase their influence in rule-making and agenda-setting. But despite ostensibly wider participation in international trade negotiations, many other developing countries, including small vulnerable states (SVEs), have been unable to secure the outcomes they desire. The economic well-being and prospects of countries with open economies that are most influenced by outside developments and are vulnerable to external shocks are heavily dependent on the international economic environment. Hence, a major policy aim of these states is to ensure that the commercial and regulatory environment in which they operate is supportive of their interests. Many of these states are members of the Commonwealth, so its Secretariat places a high priority on assisting them to participate more effectively in rule-making and to advance their interests in trade negotiations.

This aim is shared by many other multilateral institutions and donor countries that have conducted long-running trade policy support programmes focusing on capacity building in developing countries. The implicit assumption that underlies this support is that the reason for the lack of effective participation and success in negotiations is institutional weakness. Despite the fact that the programmes have been in operation for several years, it is debatable whether SVEs have been achieving substantially better results from negotiations. If they have not, this could be because the programmes have not yet had time to be effective or because they need to be more comprehensive. But could other factors also be impeding success?

It was to answer this question that the Commonwealth Secretariat commissioned the Global Economic Governance Programme, under the direction of Professor Ngaire Woods, to assess the nature and extent of the constraints that inhibit SVEs from achieving their desired negotiating outcomes. Professor Woods brought together a large multi-disciplinary team to undertake the research. It reviewed the existing state of knowledge,

conducted extensive interviews, surveyed negotiators and policy-makers and then undertook its analysis.

The findings substantiate the existence and importance of some of the currently presumed constraints, for example lack of technical information and the means to finance participation in certain negotiating meetings. However, the investigation overturned some of the conventional wisdom underlying current capacity building programmes and other donor support in negotiations for developing countries. An implicit, but very significant, finding is that power asymmetries cannot be ignored. Interestingly, the study also found that some of the key constraints are domestic and institutional, and relate to how SVEs themselves choose to prioritise, prepare for and organise their engagement with other parties. The implication of this finding is significant, in that it suggests that the policies and actions of the state itself play a critical and decisive role.

By helping SVEs methodically identify and analyse the obstacles that impede them from securing their desired outcomes from trade and other economic negotiations, this research can help them in their efforts to create conditions in the international policy and regulatory framework that are more supportive of SVEs' development interests.

Although the focus was principally on small states, the constraints identified are not necessarily exclusive to them. The research findings also provide useful insights for other developing countries that are prevented from achieving their aims because they share some of the same characteristics and are subject to similar impediments.

Manoeuvring at the Margins is a welcome and commendable addition to the existing body of knowledge relating to the understanding of the involvement of SVEs in trade negotiations and their engagement in commercial diplomacy. It can make a real and valuable difference to the performance of these marginalised countries. However, this study provides only an initial diagnosis: governments and negotiators will have to use the knowledge and analysis it provides to creatively adapt their policies, structures and tactics. Similarly, donor agencies that support developing countries can gain valuable insights to assist them in refashioning and retargeting their programmes. The work can help all parties to focus on and effectively address, in a holistic manner, the actual, rather than presumed, constraints that SVEs face in trade negotiations.

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