

Mr Valdis Dombrovskis  
Executive Vice President  
Commissioner for Trade  
European Commission  
Rue de la Loi 200

B – 1049 Brussels

22 October 2020

**Subject: The urgent need to renew the free trade agreement expert group.**

Dear Executive Vice President Dombrovskis,

In our capacity as former members of the 'free trade agreement expert group', we would like to congratulate you on your appointment as European Commissioner for Trade.

During your hearing in the INTA committee, you stressed that you would like to maintain an active outreach to civil society. We welcome this statement and recommend to renew the free trade agreement expert group to achieve this goal.

The creation of the expert group was a very positive step in the Commission's strategy to improve engagement with civil society in trade policy and to increase transparency. It was also the logical continuity of the TTIP advisory group, that many of us were members of. This expert group made it possible for public and private interest groups to talk to the Trade Commissioner and lead negotiators on all EU trade agreements. It constituted more than a dialogue as we were able to discuss in detail and provide input on key EU proposals such as the reform of the WTO. It was also a forum where we could better understand the challenges and opportunities of trade deals for the different interests that we represent. It contributed to build bridges between the different organisations.

Your predecessor expressed a willingness to update and upgrade this expert group and create a link with the Chief Trade Enforcement Officer. However, we have been told in May that the expert group will not be renewed, five months after the end of its mandate.

While we welcome your willingness to engage with civil society in the future, we are concerned about the lack of engagement in the meantime. The COVID-19 crisis makes it especially difficult for our organisations to monitor the virtual negotiations and exchange of letters. At the same time, trade policy will need to adapt to the post-crisis reality. Input from civil society will be essential to get the trade policy review right and ensure it will respond to all interests, including sustainable development and public interest needs. In addition, many other upcoming trade initiatives ought to be discussed with civil society already this year. Delaying such engagement would risk being perceived as a step backwards in the Commission's engagement with civil society and transparency in trade policy.

That is why we call on you to renew the group as soon as possible. This group should be tasked with providing expertise on all aspects of EU trade policy: multilateral and bilateral engagements, negotiations, enforcement, and other trade policy tools. To be able to provide relevant advice, experts should have access to draft EU proposals. In addition, the Chief Trade Enforcement Officer should be involved, using the expertise of the civil society organisations within the group. These aspects would drastically improve the scope of support that could be delivered by the previous group and contribute to the work of DG Trade in an inclusive manner.

We look forward to your feedback on our concerns and recommendations.

With best wishes,



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