

Meetings enhance capacity of telecoms and trade

OFFICIALS responsible for trade and telecommunications in Pacific Island Countries have been meeting in Fiji this week to attend a seminar on telecommunications services organised by the Office of the Chief Trade Adviser and the World Trade Organization, with the financial support of the European Union.

Benjamin Mutandadzi, Communications Officer for the Office of the Chief Trade Adviser (OCTA) said that the seminar, held in Nadi from April 20-22, was intended to enhance the knowledge of trade officials about the key market and regulatory trends in the telecommunications sector, while also increasing telecom officials' knowledge of trade obligations under preferential and multilateral trade agreements.

The seminar also highlighted best regulatory practices in the telecommunications sector, and underscored the economic

importance of a well-performing sector for the Pacific Island Countries.

The seminar was to enhance the capacity of Pacific Island Countries which are WTO Members to engage effectively in negotiations on trade in services in the context of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Doha Development Agenda as well as in the trade in services negotiations under the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus, involving the fourteen Pacific Island Countries, Australia and New Zealand.

It also highlighted the technical assistance programmes of the WTO to strengthen the capacity of Pacific Island Countries in trade policy matters. The resource persons were from the WTO, OCTA and the Office of the Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator of Vanuatu.



The WTO's Dr Luanga Mukela and Ms Lee Tuthill, Vanuatu Telecommunications Regulator Ron Box with other participants at the OCTA/WTO Regional Seminar on Telecommunications Services held in Nadi, Fiji

The Chief Trade Adviser of the Pacific Island Countries, Dr Edwini Kessie, believes that improved coordination in the telecommunications sector is vital for economic prosperity of the Pacific Island Countries, which is very dependent on trade in services, including telecommunications services.

"The telecommunication sector is highly dynamic and key to economic development, especially in this region," he said.

"Trade negotiations in the context of PACER Plus can encourage best regulatory practices in the telecom sector, and therefore provide benefits for users across the PICs.

"However, coordination between trade and telecom officials is essential, and this event will therefore enhance the participation of PICs in services negotiations, and their capacity to reap benefits," Dr Kessie said.

A counsellor at the WTO Secretariat, Ms Lee Tuthill, says the telecoms sector can help PICs to overcome their geographical isolation and play a more active role in international trade to achieve economic growth and sustainable development.

"Multilateral and regional trade agreements can be the catalyst for decisions regarding key reforms in the sector. They can also serve to lock-in autonomous reforms initiated by countries," she said.

"In this age, cheap and reliable telecommunication cut distance and reduce isolation. They are an engine for economic growth and development."

The PACER Plus negotiations were launched by Pacific Leaders in August 2009 in Cairns, Australia. It is expected to result in a trade and development agreement that would inject dynamism into the economies of Pacific Island Countries and enable them to derive significant benefits from international trade.

The negotiations cover a broad range of issues, including regional labour mobility, development and economic cooperation, trade in goods, trade in services and investment. The PACER Plus Parties intend to conclude the negotiations by July 2016.

The next negotiating meeting of PACER Plus officials will take place in Port Vila from May 5 to 7.