

Opening Ceremony of the 2018-19 WTI Advanced Master Programmes

Bern, 13 September 2018

Welcome and introduction

by P. Van den Bossche, WTI Director of Studies

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I warmly welcome you to this ceremony to mark the opening of our academic year at the WTI and the start of this year's MILE and TRAIL+ Advanced Master Programmes. This is the 19th time that the WTI offers the MILE Programme - and I extend in this regard a special welcome to Prof. em. Thomas Cottier, the founder of the WTI. It is the 2nd time that the TRAIL+ Programme is on offer. We are very happy to welcome today 24 master students from 11 different countries. Happy we are, but our happiness is *overshadowed* by the state of crisis in which the multilateral trading system finds itself today. What was – until recently – hardly imaginable, is now happening. Populist economic nationalism and trade protectionist policies have replaced in some countries: (1) the commitment to open markets and non-discrimination; (2) the commitment to sustainable economic growth *for all*; and (3) the commitment to a *rules-based* multilateral trading system. You have seen over the past year, trade

disagreements being addressed by unilateral action, ... which transformed these disagreements into trade conflicts, ... which in some cases have now escalated into open trade warfare. The World Trade Organization, the international institution which was established in 1995 to bring security and predictability to international trade relations, has been 'undermined' and 'side-lined'. For many years already, the WTO has shown itself unable to be the forum on which its members negotiate new rules adapted to the 21st century realities of international trade.

However, it is often said, and correctly so, that – over the years – the WTO has been quite successful in resolving trade disputes.

Unfortunately, the WTO dispute settlement system – this jewel in the crown of the WTO – is currently under tremendous stress and 'bleeding out' (to use a dramatic but correct term). If nothing is done to overcome the current crisis, the WTO Appellate Body will by the end of next year (if not before) cease to function, and the WTO dispute settlement system will be – for all practical purpose – no longer operational. This is a very sad state of affairs.

Allow me to address directly the incoming MILE and TRAIL+ students among you and ask the following question. Against the background of this sad state of affairs, are you making a big mistake to dedicate a year to studying the law and policy of international trade and international

economic governance? Is there still a professional future for you in international trade and international economic governance? Are you boarding a fast sinking ship? I force myself to believe that you are not, and we should, and will, do all that is possible to prevent this ship from sinking. This ship has served us very well since its launch in 1995, and it can – with modifications and adaptations – continue to serve us for many years to come. However, if the ship would sink, it is clear that a new and better ship – a ship more adapted to 21st century realities – will have to be built. The international community cannot be without. People like me will go down with the current ship, but you, will have a place in the lifeboats (the second-generation regional trade agreements?), because it will be up to you to build the new ship. To be such shipbuilders, you will need of the knowledge and skills that the WTI will transmit to you over the next year.

Both the MILE Programme and the TRAIL+ Programme are demanding programmes, and this for several reasons. They are demanding because they require you to obtain 90 study points, rather than the more common requirement of 60 study points, ... but these programmes are also demanding – and I would say even more so – because of their interdisciplinary character. The lawyers among you will find the economics courses very challenging, while the economists among you

will struggle to understand how the legal mind works (or doesn't work). Political scientists may find both the law and the economics of international economic governance 'bewildering'. In the coming year, there will be a lot of intellectual *sweat* and probably also a few *tears*. If that were not the case, we, the WTI, would not live up to our promise to prepare you well for a career in international trade and economic governance. However, do not panic, the fact that we have admitted you to the MILE or TRAIL+ Programme, means that we believe that you have what it takes to successfully complete either programme. The WTI has a high success rate and I trust that this year will be no different from previous years.

It is a cherished WTI tradition to open the academic year with a keynote lecture, and I am very happy that we found Ambassador Markus Schlagenhof willing to give this year's keynote lecture. Ambassador Schlagenhof is the Delegate of the Federal Council for Trade Agreements and Head of the World Trade Division of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs of Switzerland. Ambassador Schlagenhof will speak about *The Shape of International Trade to Come: Opportunities and Challenges (in particular for medium-sized economies)*. I can think of few people better placed to address this topic and give us some perspective on what the future may bring. Mr.

Ambassador, with our sincere thanks for having accepted our invitation to deliver this keynote lecture, I give you the floor.