

Saturday, 9 March 2013

Subject: Letter from Johannesburg

Dear All:

The Mandela Institute in Johannesburg hosted on March 7 and 8, 2013, the second African International Law Network Conference, a regional branch of the Society of International Economic Law (SIEL). The event was widely attended by some 125 mainly young scholars from all parts of the African continent and senior African scholars, some of them based abroad. Government and the private sector also were represented. The event was masterminded and organized by Ms Malebakeng Forere, the chair of the network and a PhD student at the WTI. I should like to congratulate her. She did a wonderful job. Prof. Marylyn Christianson, director of the Mandela Institute, and her team, in particular Ms Julie Dunsford, did an excellent job in organizing the event in a professional manner.

The second conference further built the network and contacts among young scholars and made a significant contribution to building the academic community in Africa in international economic law. On the part of the WTI, Dannie, Stephen, Romulo Victor, Rafael and myself attended, presenting and chairing, respectively. It was a pleasure to meet a number of MILE alumni.

The programme contained a number of plenaries, but was mainly organized in parallel sessions dedicated to the presentation and discussion of a wide range of topics. Please find the programme attached. What I somewhat missed were focused panel discussions, a point well noted and also relevant for us in preparing the 2014 SIEL Conference in Bern. The event was supported by the SECO project and the WTO. The event further reinforced the status of the Mandela Institute as a leading center in Africa on trade policy. It made an important contribution in achieving the goals of the SECO project. It also further reinforced the cooperation between WTI and the Mandela Institute.

It is inspiring to see a growing community of African scholars dedicated to the subject. It was impressed by the sense of purpose in building trade relations and governance in Africa. How much enthusiasm and optimism there is (I recommend reading the timely Special Report on emerging Africa the Economist of March 2nd, 2013). We can learn from this mindset in contemporary Europe and Switzerland. The problems discussed and encountered are well-known, ranging from a lacking need to trade among Africans to lack of infrastructure to the problem of land grabbing and subsistence farming. The papers covered a wide range of topics, and discussed them in a critical and constructive way, albeit often still in a general manner. Training in research, in particular defining proper and focused topics, remains important. It is a matter of building scholarship on the subject, and this is under way. The contribution of WTI and in particular of SECO to this conference was much appreciated by the Mandela Institute and participants. We are proud to be part of this at the WTI.

On Thursday evening, I gave a dinner talk at the Swiss Ambassador's residence in Pretoria on the EU and Swiss EU relations. The guests were mixed, RSA government officials, business people, both African and Swiss, including Dr. Stephen Gelb who recently joined WTI. The main interest was on assessing the future of the EU, on challenges in Swiss EU relations in the light of declining banking secrecy protection and the emerging EU/US FTA. I made the case for long-term engagement of Switzerland in the process of European integration, and emphasized the long-term relevance of the WTO in regulatory affairs in the multipolar World. RSA hosts the BRICS meeting in a few weeks, and increasingly grows into a regional power critical in the pursuit of African interests.

Kind regards

Thomas Cottier

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