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The interface of multilateralism and regionalism within the world trade organisation: contextualising the new partnership for Africa's development

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ABSTRACT

The research attempts to contextualise the African Union/New Partnership for Africa's Development (AU/NEPAD) within the current trends in the international political economy by studying the historic and legalistic approaches to trade-centred regionalism, plurilateralism, multilateralism, and their relation with developmental regionalism. The study argues that the proliferation of regionalism and plurilateralism is a result of the operational weakness of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in dealing with increasing membership and therefore issues areas, and especially the loopholes in the regional trade agreements (RTAs) regulation. For example, in the WTO provisions for establishing RTAs, the interpretation of "substantially all trade"[1] and the Enabling Clause do not provide a percentage to be covered nor to be excluded. Besides, the multilateral trade institution does not differentiate between plurilateralism and regionalism.

The AU/NEPAD is a response to the uncertainties of the multilateral trade regime and seeks to promote economic development and regional integration in Africa. Though the study is informed by theoretical and intellectual arguments, it is also guided by practical economic policy questions and development concerns. Hence it explains the shift from the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) to NEPAD in terms of ideological orientation. The study argues that NEPAD suggests "reformed" developmental regionalism and calls for plurilateralism in the form of North-South partnerships that favour the economic weaknesses of developing countries and advocates strategic linking into the multilateral trading system stream characterised by interdependence.

The research concludes that NEPAD portrays a tripartite approach to economic development in the region. The first part is developmental regionalism, where NEPAD strives for collective self-reliance through "strategic linking", hence the "new partnership" as opposed to "de-linking" envisaged by conventional developmental

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[1] Report (1998) Of The Committee on Regional Trade Agreements To the General Council, WT/REG/7; http://www.itd.org/forums/7.doc

regionalism. The second part of NEPAD's approach is plurilateralism, in which it realises that inter-continental south-south cooperation is best utilised in bargaining and negotiations setting, whereas in areas of practical economic development it promotes north-south arrangements. It favours bilateralism or plurilateralism with the developed countries and emerging economies. The third part is with regards to multilateralism; where NEPAD's goals are consistent with those of the WTO. Yet the multilateral trade regime does not fully cater for NEPAD since it does not cover the developmental regionalism aspect of the programme. Hence this research is based on the hypothesis that the clash between trade-centred regionalism within the multilateral trade regime could have a negative impact on developmental regionalism in the South

The thesis tests the hypothesis by looking at the current trends in international political economy and examines how they comply with the rules and principles of the WTO. The interaction of multilateralism, plurilateralism and trade-centred regionalism with developmental regionalism is analysed in order to assess the impact that these trends have on developmental goals of the South. In an attempt to establish the nature and objectives of developmental regionalism, the thesis also looks at the status of developing countries especially Africa within the multilateral trade system. NEPAD is portrayed as "reformed" developmental regionalism that tries to reconcile liberalism with the developmental goals of Africa.