TRADE IN FISHERIES PRODUCTS

Communication from Canada

The following communication has been received from the delegation of Canada.

Trade in fishery products is increasingly important in terms of the value of products moving around the world but is constrained by a range of tariff and non-tariff barriers that restrict market access. The Ministerial meeting offers an opportunity to begin a study of these barriers and their effects on trade.

The global fish catch (i.e. all fishery products whether for food or meal) increased from about 21 mmt to over 65 mmt (million metric tonnes) in the period between 1950 and 1970; an average annual increase of 6 per cent. This growth rate declined during the seventies and the total catch in recent years has levelled off at 71-72 mmt. The volume of trade in fisheries products has, however, continued to expand and its rate of growth exceeds increases in world landings or production: the world's total catch (live weight) increased about 2 per cent between 1970 and 1979 while global trade (product weight basis) rose 32 per cent in the same period for the seven principal product groups.

1 FAO: World Fisheries to 2000 - Supply, Demand and Management, M.A. Robinson, 1980
The seven principal product groups are: fish, fresh, chilled or frozen; fish, dried, salted or smoked; crustaceans and molluscs, fresh, frozen, dried, salted, etc.; fish products and preparations whether or not in airtight containers; crustacean and mollusc products and preparations whether or not in airtight containers; oils and fats, crude or refined of aquatic animal origin; and meals, solubles and similar animal feeding stuffs of aquatic animal origin.

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Global exports of fishery commodities (i.e. food fish) totalled US$14.8 billion in 1980, an increase of 52 per cent over the 1976-78 average of US$9.7 billion, but these general figures mask some important trends in global trade patterns. Developing countries, for example, account for about 12 per cent of the world's imports of fishery commodities but have shown a steady pattern of export growth since the early seventies; in the period 1970-72 they accounted for 30 per cent of global exports and by 1982 this had risen to 38 per cent. These high export levels (developing countries exported US$5.6 billion of fishery commodities in 1980) give developing countries a strong interest in conditions of market access that complements the interests of developed producers.

Trade in fisheries products tends to be constrained by high trade barriers and few tariff bindings. Tariffs on fisheries products, for instance, have not been subject to the broad tariff cutting formulae used in recent negotiations but were negotiated on a line-by-line and request-offer basis that has led to fewer concessions, in terms of tariff levels and bindings, than is the case for industrial products in general. There is also a range of non-tariff barriers that affect trade in fisheries products: examples of these are licensing requirements, the effect of State-trading régimes, quantitative restrictions on imports, internal taxes or restrictions, and minimum import price systems. These non-tariff barriers, which seem to have become more effective in recent years, provide protection to domestic producers and may also serve to discriminate between foreign suppliers.

It is against this background that Canada is proposing that trade in fisheries products should be included in the work programme to be approved by Ministers. Work might begin with a study by the secretariat of the treatment of fisheries trade under the GATT including a review of the tariff and non-tariff barriers that restrict market access. This could, in turn, lead to an examination of possible solutions to the barriers identified.

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1. FAO: Commodity and Review Outlook: 1981-82
2. Ibid