

Nobel laureate economist says WTO talks need to be focused on poor countries

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WTO negotiations need to be refocused on the interests of poor countries if they are to fulfil their development goals, Nobel laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz said in an opinion piece published Monday.

A little over a week after the 147 members of the World Trade Organisation reached a deal for relaunching the current round of free-trade talks, launched in 2001 in Doha, Stiglitz wrote in French newspaper Les Echos that the agenda for discussions was set "by rich countries, whose financial and trade interests are predominant, depending on their interests".

In order to improve talks and fulfil the development goals of the Doha round of negotiations, "it is time to make up a trade negotiating programme to benefit the poorest countries," he said.

"If the current round of negotiations are redirected towards the poorest development countries and if we help them put the adopted measures into place and (help) with adjustment costs, they will have a lot to gain," he said.

He recommended a cut in rich-country agriculture subsidies which hurt poor countries and continue to distort trade, especially in cotton.

He also suggested that the WTO help developing countries enter the market for labour-intensive services not requiring qualifications.

Stiglitz, a former World Bank economist turned critic of international economic institutions, won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2001 and is author of the best-selling book "Globalization and Its Discontents".

At the beginning of the month, delegates to a WTO meeting in Geneva salvaged global trade talks with a compromise deal on reducing the huge subsidies paid to farmers in the United States and Europe.