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Life after Doha

When the last ministerial meeting of the Doha round of global trade talks failed in 2008, this newspaper argued that leaders should admit the negotiations were dead. Last week, Karel de Gucht, European Union trade commissioner, had the courage to say what his predecessors and most counterparts have not: it is time to think of a Plan B.

With a “the King is dead” must come a “long live the King”. In order for the World Trade Organisation to remain as **more than just a dispute-settlement process**, its members should show that the **rule-making system** can adapt and renew itself. This means putting more effort into **narrower projects, as opposed to the large-scale “single undertaking”** talks of the past.

One model is the WTO’s plurilateral government procurement agreement (GPA), which played a valuable if little-noticed role in limiting distortions from public stimulus and bailout spending during the financial crisis. Negotiators would spend their time better by pushing China to fulfil its pledges and join the GPA than by going round the old arguments of Doha.

WTO members should negotiate smaller **sector-specific deals**, particularly in services. It could also finally begin to use the powers it has to keep bilateral and other preferential trade agreements within the rules. Such pacts are a poor substitute for multilateralism, but, if they must exist, better that they be regulated. The WTO should also push on with work it has already started on how private sector **health and hygiene standards** operate as disguised protectionism. It should also turn to global commerce in commodities, where concentrated market power, investment rules and access to markets are all areas of potential concern.

None of this is easy. It will require ministers to unlearn ingrained habits and focus on substance not rhetoric. It will mean **business associations engaging with the granular detail of what companies want**. It will involve development activists giving up the founding myth

of Doha – that **western farm subsidies and tariffs**, outrageous as they are, are the main obstacle to poor nations' integrating with the global economy.

But all this is far better than permanently persisting with negotiations whose failure is leaching credibility from the very principle of multilateralism. A decade is enough time to waste. By the tenth anniversary of its birth this November, and in the absence of a deal, Doha should be brought to a dignified end. Planning the post-Doha agenda should begin now.