

WTO Ministerial Meeting in Seattle (November 1999)

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Description The 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) Meeting was organized to address a number of issues that remained unresolved after the Uruguay Round of trade talks. Trade ministers converged in Seattle, Washington in late November, 1999. Unfortunately, the talks eventually broke down and this ministerial meeting was considered a failure. Despite the media coverage of the "Battle in Seattle" waged by antiglobalization groups, this failure is attributable more to the differences among the various state actors.

The "Battle in Seattle" involved a number of different antiglobalization groups, including radical groups such as Rainforest Action Network, the Ruckus Society, and Fifty Years Is Enough, as well as more mainstream groups like Public Citizen, the Teamsters, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Many of these groups and individuals argued that the WTO threatens the sovereignty of not only the nation, but also the individual.

The media coverage of the outbreak of violence during the protests may have led some to believe that the Seattle talks failed because of the demonstrations and protests held by these groups. The Seattle meeting failed, however, because of the inability of the WTO members to come to an agreement on agriculture, tariffs, antidumping, competition policy, and investment. These were all areas that elicited great divisions among the members, including the developed nations. Developing nations felt that the Uruguay Round did not adequately address their needs and concerns. They argued that the introduction of labour and environmental standards as proposed by the developed world would discriminate against them, becoming a form of protectionism which was contrary to the principles of the WTO. The developed nations, with the guidance of the United States, however, felt that these new standards were essential to the talks. The developing nations also wanted to focus more on decreasing barriers to agricultural trade and textiles. It was the inability of both sides to come to an agreement which led to the collapse of the meeting, showing that state sovereignty does play an important role in coming to an agreement within this institution.

Suggested Reading: **Spero, J.E. and J. Hart.** 2003. *The politics of international economic relations*. 6th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Thomas, Janet. 2000. *The battle in Seattle: The story behind and beyond*

the WTO demonstrations. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.

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