

Global Academics' Expert Letter on LDCs' TRIPS Extension Request

April 27, 2013

To WTO TRIPS Council Members:

We are 130-plus legal and other academics from high-, middle-, and low-income countries who specialize in international intellectual property and trade law, development studies, human rights, and other related disciplines. We are writing in unequivocal support of the extension requested by Least Developed Country Members of the World Trade Organization (LDC Members) for an unconditional extension of the time period within which LDC Members must become compliant with the WTO TRIPS Agreement. Pursuant to the properly motivated request from Haiti on behalf of LDC Members, the extension for any particular country could last as long as that country was still an LDC.¹ LDC Members would retain freedom to amend national legislation to change or modify any existing intellectual property legislation subject only to compliance with national treatment and most favored nation treatment requirements.

Our support for the requested extension is grounded on both the history and language of Article 66.1 of the TRIPS Agreement² and on the need of LDC Members to retain policy space if they are to develop their technological base such that intellectual property protections might be helpful rather than harmful to their development processes. In particular, our expert analysis is grounded on the following:

(1) Article 66.1 was explicitly premised on a collective understanding at the WTO that LDC Members needed flexibility “to create a viable technological base” and that they had additional “special needs and requirements” with respect to “their economic, financial and administrative constraints”. This understanding was also fully captured in the Preamble to the TRIPS Agreement.³

(2) This Article 66.1 consensus in turn reflected an understanding that the premature adoption of TRIPS-compliant intellectual property protections by LDC Members could impede the development of a viable technological base and other needed capacities or alternatively, at the very least, that countries needed to retain

¹ “Least developed country Members shall not be required to apply the provisions of the Agreement, other than Articles 3, 4 and 5, until they cease to be a least developed country Member.” Request for an Extension of the Transition Period Under Article 66.1, IP/C/W/583 (November 5, 2012), available at http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/ta_docs_e/7_1_ipcw583_e.pdf.

² “In view of the special needs and requirements of least-developed country Members, their economic, financial and administrative constraints, and their need for flexibility to create a viable technological base, such Members shall not be required to apply the provisions of this Agreement, other than Articles 3, 4 and 5, for a period of 10 years from the date of application as defined under paragraph 1 of Article 65. *The Council for TRIPS shall, upon duly motivated request by a least-developed country Member, accord extensions of this period.*” (Emphases added.)

³ This understanding of LDC Members need for flexibility is also reflected in the Preamble to the TRIPS Agreement: “Members ... Recognizing also the special needs of the least-developed country Members in respect of maximum flexibility in the domestic implementation of laws and regulations in order to enable them to create a sound and viable technological base ... agree.”

policy space to make their own decisions in this regard. Existing empirical evidence does not support the proposition that heightened intellectual property protections have had positive impacts on foreign direct investment, local innovation, technological capacity-building, or even development more broadly in LDCs.⁴

(3) Article 66.1 expressly permitted LDC Members to dismantle any intellectual property legislation that they had enacted prior to the adoption of the TRIPS Agreement or even during the original LDC transition period. This same right should have been granted in any further extensions thereof, meaning that the paragraph 5 stay-put provision in the 2005 extension⁵ was improvidently granted and it should not be incorporated into the 2013 extension.⁶

⁴ See e.g. Commission on Intellectual Property Rights, *Integrating Intellectual Property Rights and Development Policy Report*, 40 (London, 2002) (finding that the considerable literature linking IP and development that exists is largely speculative, tentative, and questionable given limitations on data and methodology and concluding that there is a lack of evidence finding that FDI is positively related to IP protection in developing countries); accord K.E. Maskus, *PRIVATE RIGHTS AND PUBLIC PROBLEMS: THE GLOBAL ECONOMY OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY IN THE 21ST CENTURY*, 63 (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2012) (noting “[s]pecifically, there is scarce evidence that stronger IPRs encourage more access by the poorest and smallest countries to global technologies” and that “there is no clear universal relationship between policy reforms that strengthen IPRs and subsequent innovation or R&D investments”); see also P.G. Sampath and P. Roffe, *UNPACKING THE INTERNATIONAL TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER DEBATE: FIFTY YEARS AND BEYOND* (Geneva: International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, 2012) (reporting no direct evidence of IPR protection on promotion of technology transfer in developing countries); K. Briggs, *Does Patent Harmonization impact the decision of volume of high technology trade?*, 25 INT’L REV. ECON. & FIN. 35-51 (2012) (finding that studies reach difference conclusions about the impact of patent rights on growth in different income group countries and that her own study finds that patent reform and harmonization in low income countries plays a minor role at best in terms of facilitating technology transfer through trade); Albert G.Z. Hu & I.P.L. Png, *Patent Rights and Economic Growth: Evidence from Cross-Country Panels of Manufacturing Industries*, 1 (2010) (“[T]here is scant empirical evidence to validate the basic premise that IP rights have fostered or do foster invention and creative work, still less economic growth”), available at http://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/mdocs/en/wipo_ip_econ_ge_5_10/wipo_ip_econ_ge_5_10_ref_huandpng.pdf.

⁵ “Least-developed country Members will ensure that any changes in their laws, regulations and practice made during the additional transitional period do not result in a lesser degree of consistency with the provisions of the TRIPS Agreement.” Extension of the Transition Period under Article 66.1 for Least Developed Country Members, Decision of the TRIPS Council 29 November 2005, IP/C/40.

⁶ Article 66 has no requirement whatsoever that LDC Members maintain any existing level of intellectual property protection. LDC Members were thus free to dismantle intellectual property regimes imposed during colonial rule or thereafter adopted. If they did adopt or maintain any intellectual property protections, their only substantive requirements under TRIPS were to provide national and most favoured nation treatments. In contrast, non-LDC Members were given variable transition periods under Article 65 of TRIPS depending on whether they had previously declined to provide patent protections on products in a particular field of technology (commonly pharmaceuticals and agricultural products), whether they were transitioning from a planned economy or not. In such cases, however, Article 65(5) required maintenance of existing levels of IP protection during the transition period: “A Member availing itself of a transitional period under paragraphs 1, 2, 3 or 4 shall ensure that any changes in its laws, regulations and practice made during that period do not result in a lesser degree of consistency with the provisions of this Agreement.” Accordingly, even though a stay-put provision was improvidently included in the 2005 extension, no such provision should be requested or adopted in the current extension.

(4) Pursuant to Article 66.1, WTO Members expressed an understanding that LDC Members needed a significant time period during which to develop their technological and other capacities and that the initial ten-year transition period – until 2006 – might be too short, thus directly allowing for one or more further “extensions” thereof.

(5) Experience has shown that very few LDCs have been able to graduate from LDC status since 1991 (only Botswana, Cape Verde, and the Maldives) and that those that have graduated have done so primarily on the basis of improved GDP rather than technological development per se. Admittedly, several other countries are on the threshold of graduation,⁷ but many LDC Members have not even approached eligibility for graduation.

(6) Experience under Article 66.1 also shows that a series of time-limited transition periods and extensions, such as the initial ten-year transition period and the seven and a half year extension granted in 2005, has been insufficient for technological transformation and capacity building for the vast majority of LDC Members, especially in light of developed countries having failed to facilitate meaningful technology transfer as required by Article 66.2.⁸ Thus, a much longer extension is needed during which LDC Members can devote their entire attention to development objectives. There is WTO precedent for extensions that last as long as a Member is an LDC.⁹

(7) Technical assistance for LDC Members to date has ill-advisedly focused on capacity building for TRIPS-compliance pursuant to Article 67¹⁰ rather than on capacity building and technology transfer for development pursuant to Article 66, diverting the attention of both LDC Members and their development partners. Thus,

⁷ Equatorial Guinea, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

⁸ “Developed country Members shall provide incentives to enterprises and institutions in their territories for the purpose of promoting and encouraging technology transfer to least-developed country Members in order to enable them to create a sound and viable technological base.” See Suerie Moon, *Meaningful Technology Transfer to the LDCs: A Proposal for a Monitoring Mechanism for TRIPS Article 66.2*, ICTSD POLICY BRIEF NO. 9 (2011).

⁹ Article 15.2 (Special and Differential Treatment) of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture states: “Developing country Members shall have the flexibility to implement reduction commitments over a period of up to 10 years. Least-developed country Members shall not be required to undertake reduction commitments.”

¹⁰ “In order to facilitate the implementation of this Agreement, developed country Members shall provide, on request and on mutually agreed terms and conditions, technical and financial cooperation in favour of developing and least-developed country Members. Such cooperation shall include assistance in the preparation of laws and regulations on the protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights as well as on the prevention of their abuse, and shall include support regarding the establishment or reinforcement of domestic offices and agencies relevant to these matters, including the training of personnel.” For a report representing this erroneous focus, see SAANA Consulting, *APPROACH PAPER – ASSESSING LDC PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WTO TRIPS AGREEMENT* (Draft Report Oct. 2011), available at a link at <http://keionline.org/node/1572>.

it would be inappropriate to include requirements with respect to reporting priority needs for TRIPS compliance in the current LDC extension request.¹¹

(8) Premature adoption of TRIPS-compliant intellectual property regimes in LDC Members will adversely affect their ability to fulfill human rights obligations with respect to the provision of essential public goods including medicines, educational and scientific resources, food security, and technologies for environmental protection, energy conservation, and climate control/mitigation. Intellectual property protections on key commodities and resources can lead to supra-competitive pricing and thus to unaffordability for LDCs Members and their citizens.

(9) Pursuant to Article 66.1, the TRIPS Council “shall ... accord extensions” upon duly motivated requests, meaning that extensions are mandatory – a matter of right – rather than something that can be negotiated downward by developed country members. Such extensions are to be granted by the TRIPS Council and therefore should not be postponed until the WTO general meeting in Bali in December of 2013.

(10) The adoption of the extension would not impede efforts of some LDC Members, if desired, to adopt certain forms of intellectual property, e.g., utility models or trademarks, or to experiment with early introduction of limited rights in other areas. In other words, such differentiation will certainly be a possibility but not a requirement.

There have been reports that certain developed country Members, particularly the U.S. and E.U., are putting pressure on LDC Members and their allies to water-down their extension request and to accept a much shorter timeframe (as little as five years); a stay-put provision locking in existing levels of intellectual property protection; differential approaches for different intellectual property rights, i.e. patents and trademarks; and/or differential treatment for different LDC Members.

In our opinion, all of these downward demands are unjustified and contrary to the language and spirit of Article 66.1. On the other hand, we note that many organizations have expressed support for the LDC extension request, including UNDP and UNAIDS,¹² the Global Commission on HIV and the Law,¹³ a consortium of 300 civil society organizations,¹⁴ developing country Members,¹⁵ and others.¹⁶

¹¹ This was another “mistake” in the 2005 extension, where in paragraph 2, LDC Members were asked to provide the TRIPS Council with as much information as possible on their priority needs for technical and financial assistance primarily to help them take the necessary steps to implement the TRIPS Agreement. Developed countries were then asked in paragraph 3 to provide technical and financial help to least developed countries to address the identified needs effectively.

¹² Issue Brief: TRIPS transition period extensions for least-developed countries (2013), available at http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/unaidspublication/2013/JC2474_TRIP_S-transition-period-extensions_en.pdf;

¹³ Recommendation 6.4. “The WTO members must indefinitely extend the exemption for LDCs from the application of TRIPS provisions in the case of pharmaceutical products. The UN and its member states must

In conclusion, we repeat our unreserved support for the requested extension of the transition period for LDC Members to implement TRIPS so long as they remain an LDC and our conviction that this request is fully justified under Article 66.1 of the TRIPS Agreement and that arguments and efforts opposing it are unfounded.

Very truly yours,

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mobilise adequate resources to support LDCs to retain this policy latitude.” RISKS, RIGHTS & HEALTH (2012), available at <http://www.hivlawcommission.org/resources/report/FinalReport-Risks,Rights&Health-EN.pdf>.

¹⁴ See <http://www.ip-watch.org/weblog/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/CSO-Letter-Supporting-Extension-of-LDCs-Transition-Period.pdf>.

¹⁵ Catherine Saez, “WTO: Wide Support for LDC TRIPS Extension, With A Hitch”, IP-WATCH (March 6, 2013), available at <http://www.ip-watch.org/2013/03/06/wto-wide-support-for-ldc-trips-transition-extension-with-a-hitch/>.

¹⁶ See e.g. Computer & Communications Industry Association, “CCIA Endorses TRIPS Deferral Request for Least Developed Countries” (March 4, 2013), available at <http://www.ccia.net.org/index.asp?sid=5&artid=363&evtflg=False>.

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