

17 July, 2024

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala  
Director General  
World Trade Organization

Dear Dr. Ngozi:

We are civil society representatives who have previously participated in the WTO's Public Forum and had every intention of doing so again this year. We are writing to you today to express our concerns about how the WTO PF24 is being organised this year and how this will impact meaningful participation of civil society voices.

The Public Forum was created in response to complaints from civil society about the WTO's opacity and limited possibilities for stakeholder engagement. The WTO itself describes the Public Forum as the WTO's "largest outreach event" signifying the weight given by the organisation to the opportunity for interventions from civil society and others.

However, at the Public Forum in 2023 a significant amount of the session times were taken for sessions that were either organised by the WTO Secretariat or profiled WTO Secretariat speakers, including one whole day, reducing the spaces for civil society to share their voices. This continues a trend that has seen the slow erosion of sessions for civil society.

This year the WTO Secretariat announced a number of changes that will result in the further shrinking of the space for civil society to engage in this outreach event and undermine the WTO's stated aim for the event. The allocation of only two sessions per time slot will see a dramatic reduction in sessions being accepted for the Forum. This lessens the diversity of voices being given access to the WTO, leaving delegates, civil society and the broader discussion about the key issues facing the WTO and Members poorer. We do not accept that there is limited available space in the WTO to accommodate more simultaneous sessions when the [June 2024 Global Review of Aid for Trade at the WTO had six \(and sometimes 7\) simultaneous sessions](#).

We have already seen the impact of these cuts. A number of panels we have proposed that clearly fit the stated criteria have been rejected with no indication of why they were rejected. In most cases this followed an email advising that the panels had been accepted. What is the Secretariat's goal for the allocation of time slots? Half to civil society and half to industry? How many spots will the WTO itself take up when it should be in listening mode? What criteria are being used to determine the acceptance of panels, aside from those stated on the webpage?

In addition to limiting the sessions, the decision to withdraw the provision of interpretation for working sessions will make it harder for a wider audience to attend sessions. The WTO has three official languages; however, the decision to withdraw interpretation means

that it is cutting off the participation of some Members and civil society. Placing the financial burden for interpretation back onto the organisers of the sessions will result in many not opting for such support, especially those from the Global South, non-government organisations and trade unions, hampering dialogue amongst Members and civil society.

These decisions to limit the effectiveness of the WTO Public Forum as an outreach event come on the back of the shrinking of space for civil society that was experienced at MC13. During the Ministerial a number of NGO Observers were detained, the provision of NGO materials was initially banned, conflicting advice was given regarding the ability to photograph a public building, and visas were not facilitated adequately by the Secretariat.

The MC13 continued a concerning pattern of suppression on free speech at WTO ministerial conferences. You will be aware of the damage that was caused to the WTO's credibility when dozens of registered NGOs had their visas rescinded, and others were turned away at the airport, at the MC11 in Buenos Aires.

The WTO Public Forum is intended to be a space that can provide for a diversity of ideas and viewpoints, enriching all who attend through constructive discussion and debate. The recent changes announced undermine that.

We are seeking urgent action to expand the number of panels for civil society participation in line with the original goals of the Public Forum, a clearer explanation of all the criteria being used for selection, minimal participation by the WTO itself in PF14 sessions, and the restoration of the provision of interpretation for the working sessions, as has been done in many past Public Forums.

Signed,

### **International**

- Both ENDS
- Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)
- ITUC
- Public Services International (PSI)
- Transnational Institute (TNI)
- Third World Network

### **Regional**

- Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)
- Asia Pacific Regional Network (APRN)
- Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG)

### **National**

- AFTINET, Australia
- Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC)
- Association for Proper Internet Governance, Switzerland
- COAST Foundation, Bangladesh
- Consumers' Association of Penang, Malaysia
- Equity and Justice Working Group (EquityBD), Bangladesh
- Fundación InternetBolivia.org, Bolivia
- Fundación Vía Libre (Argentina)
- Global Justice Now, United Kingdom
- Handelskampanjen, Norway
- Indonesia for Global Justice (IGJ), Indonesia
- Instituto del Mundo del Trabajo (IMT), Argentina
- IT for Change, India
- Public Citizen, United States of America
- Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth), Malaysia
- Tanzania Trade and Investment Coalition (TATIC), Tanzania
- Trade Justice Movement, United Kingdom