

2 July 2025

Director-General Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala
World Trade Organization

Subject: Urgent Concerns Regarding Shrinking Civil Society Space at the WTO Public Forum

Dear Director-General and WTO Secretariat,

We write on behalf of the OWINFS network, with 193 civil society member organizations worldwide, to express profound concern over the systematic erosion of meaningful civil society participation in the WTO Public Forum. Established to address critiques of the WTO's lack of transparency and exclusion of civil society perspectives, the Forum has been transformed into an even more exclusionary space that privileges WTO Secretariat initiatives, corporate interests, and Northern-dominated institutions while marginalizing critical voices.

The 2024 Public Forum schedule starkly illustrated this imbalance, with over 50% of time slots allocated exclusively to WTO-organized sessions and additional slots dominated by industry lobbies such as BusinessEurope and Philip Morris, alongside institutions like the World Bank and OECD. Civil society organizations were confined to overcrowded "competing sessions" – at times up to 12 running simultaneously – often at the end of the week and the final sessions of the day, which drastically limited engagement and visibility. This structure fundamentally contradicts the purpose of the Public Forum to create inclusive dialogue and discussions.

OWINFS participated at the WTO Public Forum information meeting, on 28 of May 2025, and asked for assurance that this would not happen again this year. However, the response was that the secretariat had looked into the sessions and concluded that there was more space for OWINFS than any other civil society organization. We wonder how this conclusion was reached, since it seems to assume that any session organised by a member is also hosted by OWINFS, which is not the way we work as a network. We have 193 members working on the trade system and WTO. Further, OWINFS participation at the Public Forum, does not change the fundamental critique about an imbalance between plenary and special sessions organised by the secretariat, especially when coupled with those taken up by business, on one side, and the crowded space allocated to civil society on the other.

We are concerned that the reduction of the Public Forum to two days will further exacerbate these problems, and limit a meaningful participation by civil society in the Forum.

The refusal to allow online participation further works to exclude civil society representatives, especially from the Global South, who cannot afford to travel to Geneva, so their voices go unheard. The withdrawal of interpretation services discriminates against non-English-speaking participants, particularly from the Global South. By shifting interpretation costs to session organizers, the WTO has effectively barred under-resourced civil society groups from contributing, violating multilingual obligations and abandoning established practices of past Forums.

These exclusionary measures continue a troubling pattern of suppression witnessed at recent Ministerial Conferences, including the detention of NGO participants and obstruction of the distribution of materials at MC13 in Abu Dhabi, and the visa denials and deportations of registered NGOs at MC11 in Buenos Aires. Such actions irreparably damage the WTO's legitimacy. Our request for the development of a code of conduct for ministerial conferences to avoid this happening again has so far gone unanswered.

We hope to see a change in 2025 agenda with an expansion of the number of panels for civil society participation in line with original goals of the Public Forum, a clearer explanation of all the criteria used for selection, minimal participation by the WTO itself in Public Forum sessions, provision for at least one participant online or by recorded video, and the restoration of the provision of interpretation for the working sessions, as has been done in many past Public Forums.

Respectfully,
The facilitators of the Our World Is Not For Sale (OWINFS) Network