

March 2026

## Civil society statement on the WTO reform

Yaounde - WTO MC14

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Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS) has argued for years that WTO rules are harmful and inappropriate for global trade governance and constraining for aspirations towards transformational and sustainable developmental paths, particularly those needed in developing and least developed countries.

### The attempted hijacking of the 'reform' objective

Today, ***some of the key developed country members led by the US and the EU are attempting to hijack the stated objective of 'reforming the WTO' to push through a complete remake of the organization into what promises to be an even more dangerous construct.*** What is unfolding, which largely follows the mutually re-enforcing submissions of the [US](#) and [EU](#), lays bare the power politics that has been at the core of WTO since its establishment and would render a genuinely progressive, development-focused vision for the future impossible.

Their "reforms" aim to legitimize an organisation based on power, not on rules. It would be stripped of its non-discrimination principle, and any potential development dimension. Governance arrangements would allow a few powerful players to dominate decision-making and facilitate plurilateral deals among clubs of countries, dictated by power politics and coercive tactics. ***This would effectively constitute a takeover of the agenda-setting at the WTO by big rich economies and facilitate the interests of their corporations, while marginalizing or silencing the voices of developing and smaller economies.***

Rather than being a counter to the power-politics of the Trump administration's unilateral trade measures, the reforms envisioned by the US and EU would embed this dynamic even further in the 'rules-based order' of the WTO. One of the key underlying objectives is to legitimize and normalize the Trump administration's illegal bilateral deals that several countries have been coerced to accept. The US also wants to ensure immunity from legal challenges for unilateral trade measures.

## **China is not the only target, poorer WTO Members will suffer too**

***Although competition from China is cited as the prime target of the US and EU, it is actually the poorer WTO members who will suffer most.***

Through plurilateral agreements, and the sidelining of developing countries' own agendas, the WTO will become the platform for new rules (for example on State support and on State-Owned Enterprises) that will further constrain any pathways that developing countries might have in order to achieve long-term sustainable development and structural transformation or any kind of competitive edge.

### ***A skewed facilitator-led process***

Such a manipulative strategy has been evident since the establishment of the mandate on "WTO reform" at the WTO's 12th Ministerial Conference. It is clear that there is no agreement among the WTO Members on any one project or path to reforms. Rather there are competing projects that reflect longstanding interests and divergences among the WTO Members. ***A process led by a 'facilitator' appointment by the General Council Chair, rather than selected by the Members, ensured that discussions have been organized in a manner that diverts time and resources from discussing any genuine development mandate.*** It has been designed to eventually facilitate the dilution of Special & Differential Treatment, the discarding of consensus as basis for decision-making, and the proliferation of plurilateral deals as a replacement of actual multilateral negotiations.

The work was organized in facilitator-selected small group meetings, which often closely resembled the "green-room" format that many Members have historically opposed because of its exclusivity, limited transparency, and weak institutional accountability. This contradicts [the agreement among WTO Members at the 12th Ministerial Conference](#) that "the work shall be Member-driven, open, transparent, inclusive, and must address the interests of all Members, including development issues" and that "[t]he General Council and its subsidiary bodies will conduct the work".

### ***A false narrative is being instrumentalized***

To push this project, ***a false narrative has been instrumentalized that casts the developing countries as beneficiaries of the WTO and its agreements, while proposing that countries like the US have been victimized by the system.***

For developing and least developed economies, most of the existing trade rules tie their hands from pursuing catch-up industrialization policies and hinder their

transition to clean sustainable economies. As a result, developing and least developed countries have generally suffered chronic current account deficits and low levels of development, remaining suppliers of raw materials from which rich countries profit. Their calls for sustainable development and structural transformation, technology transfer and resilience building, including in the so-called Doha Development Round, have been blocked by the major powers.

Meanwhile, major industrial countries including the US have been permitted to maintain massive subsidies and other forms of domestic protection, particularly in sectors like agriculture and certain industrial products. These trade rules and adverse terms of trade meant that many developing countries have not been able to effectively pursue diversification and structural transformation of their economies.

Developing countries' narrative has been hijacked by rich countries demanding 'policy space' and the right to apply 'industrial policy' to 'level the playing field' that they created, but which no longer maintains their geostrategic and economic ascendancy. In reality, the multilateral trade rule book has been fundamentally biased from its creation – as even Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has acknowledged. It needs correction, particularly in relation to developing and least developed countries who were not the original designers of the system. If it continues to fail that challenge, it has no legitimacy.

### **Whose 'success' will be delivered at Yaounde?**

There is enormous pressure for the ministerial conference hosted in Africa to be a 'success' to prove that the WTO remains 'relevant'. But this **'success' risks authorising a work plan that is simply designed to deliver what the US and EU articulated in their recent submissions. To repeat, the biggest price will be paid by developing countries.** It will come at a high cost to workers, Indigenous Peoples, women, small farmers and fishers, those who need access to affordable medicine and safe food, vulnerable countries and regions being devastated by the climate crisis, and poor communities in all WTO member states whom the WTO's hyper-globalisation agenda has failed. The world's biggest corporations, from Big Tech and Pharma to agribusiness and weapons producers, will continue to dominate our world and our lives.

### **What genuine reform would look like: the OWINFS agenda**

Saying "no" to the US-EU remake of the WTO is necessary but not sufficient. OWINFS has never argued for the preservation of the current system. We have consistently argued that it must be transformed. In 2021, over 200 organisations worldwide endorsed the Turnaround statement, setting out a comprehensive

vision for new multilateral trade rules oriented towards people-centred shared prosperity and sustainable development. That vision remains the benchmark against which any "reform" must be measured.

Genuine reform would move in the opposite direction from what is currently on the table. It would not strip developing countries of flexibilities; it would expand them. It would not entrench corporate rights; it would discipline corporate power. It would not fragment the multilateral system into clubs of the willing; it would strengthen it around the needs of those it has historically failed.

Concretely, this means:

- ***People, work and public services***

Trade rules must expand, not constrain, the policy space for industrialisation, structural transformation and decent work. Performance requirements such as technology transfer and local content must be permissible as development tools. The right of states to provide universal quality public services must be protected from liberalisation disciplines. New rules on subsidies and state-owned enterprises proposed under the "level playing field" agenda must not foreclose the industrial policy tools that every now-developed country used in its own path.

- ***Food sovereignty and biodiversity***

The permanent solution on public stockholding must be delivered without further delay. The Special Safeguard Mechanism must be agreed in a form that actually protects farmers' livelihoods. Subsidies that distort global markets, particularly those of wealthy countries, must be disciplined. Cotton-producing countries in West Africa must see the fulfilment of commitments made over two decades ago. The TRIPS agreement must be amended to prevent biopiracy and the patenting of life forms must be banned.

- ***Digital sovereignty, knowledge and health***

The digital economy must not be governed by rules written by and for Big Tech. Negotiations towards binding digital trade agreements must be halted. The e-commerce moratorium must be allowed to expire so that developing countries recover fiscal sovereignty. The TRIPS non-violation complaint moratorium must be renewed permanently. Intellectual property rules must be fundamentally transformed to guarantee access to medicines, vaccines and climate-related technologies as public goods.

- ***Development, climate and democratic governance***

Special and Differential Treatment must be strengthened, not diluted. Attempts to impose eligibility criteria or "differentiation" that strip developing countries of flexibilities must be rejected. WTO rules must not obstruct countries' pursuit of a just transition, including through green technology transfer and renewable energy subsidies. The WTO must be democratised: civil society participation facilitated, documents made public, and the reform process brought under genuine member-driven governance as agreed at MC12.

***At this juncture, it is clear that 'success' at Yaounde, as envisioned by the major developed member states and the dominant WTO agenda, does not include any ounce of trade justice.***

Any outcome at MC14 must be measured against this agenda. If the ministerial delivers a work plan that advances plurilateral fragmentation, erodes Special and Differential Treatment, empowers clubs of rich countries, sidelines agriculture and food security, extends the e-commerce moratorium, and conditions dispute settlement on acceptance of a reform agenda designed by and for the powerful, then it is not reform. It is capture.

The system of rules overseen by the WTO has failed over 30 years to deliver for development, promote shared prosperity, or ensure sustainability. A different world is possible. But it requires the courage to reject false reform and to insist, in every room and at every table, on transformation that centres people, not corporations.