

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
10 September 2026

Civil Society Groups Call Out WTO for Marginalizing Public Voices Ahead of Annual Public Forum

GENEVA — A global network representing farmers, fishers, workers, and small producers has issued an open [letter](#) to World Trade Organization (WTO) Director-General Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, warning that civil society is being systematically sidelined from the organization's primary outreach event.

The civil society organisations, coordinated by the global network Our World Is Not For Sale (OWINFS), reports that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) will organize just 5% of the total sessions at this year's WTO Public Forum, disputing Secretariat claims that CSOs represent 30% of session hosts due to miscategorized corporate and institutional entries. This dramatic drop in representation follows severe, ongoing barriers faced by CSOs at recent WTO Ministerial Conferences in Buenos Aires and Abu Dhabi.

“ The Public Forum was initially launched in 2001 as a way to seek some license for the WTO following the disastrous Seattle ministerial in 1999 and widespread protests against corporate globalisation. Since then it has steadily deteriorated to become a propaganda tool for the WTO Secretariat and silenced civil society voices to allow international organisations, Member States and business to dominate”, **says Prof Em. Jane Kelsey, University of Auckland**

To restore accountability and rebuild stakeholder trust ahead of the 2027 Public Forum, the civil society organisations are urging the WTO Secretariat to take key steps:

- **Redefine CSO Criteria:** Restrict the CSO classification to entities with direct accountability to workers, farmers, fishers, small producers, and the general public
- **Establish Fair Stakeholder Allocations:** Create clear, consultative slot allocations for different stakeholder groups.
- **Refocus WTO's Role:** Limit WTO-hosted panels to prioritize external stakeholder participation
- **Transparent Selection Criteria:** Publish clear selection guidelines that explicitly value the inclusion of communities directly impacted by trade policies
- **Reinstate Interpretation Services:** Restore multilingual interpretation to ensure broad, accessible, and inclusive global participation

The global civil society network has requested an urgent meeting with Director-General Okonjo-Iweala during the upcoming Public Forum to address these concerns and establish a framework for inclusive participation moving forward.

QUOTES FROM CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS:

“WTO’s failure to accommodate Public Forum sessions proposed by legitimate non-profit organizations is very disappointing, in particular because it deprives WTO members of accurate and rich public debate, and fails to improve transparency and develop communication with NGOs, who are a valuable resource, thus contradicting the 18 July 1996 General Council Guidelines for arrangements on relations with Non-Governmental Organizations (WT/L/162). Indeed, failure to encourage participation by NGOs results in insufficient attention to issues other than the trade law issues on which most WTO participants are expert.” **Richard Hill, Association for Proper Internet Governance, Geneva, Switzerland.**

“The shrinking space for civil society at the WTO is not an administrative issue—it is a democratic and legitimacy crisis. An institution that claims to promote transparency cannot marginalise the voices of farmers, fishers, workers, small producers and affected communities while giving disproportionate space to governments, business and itself. Trade rules have real consequences for people’s rights and livelihoods. Those most affected must have the power to shape the debate, not merely be invited as spectators. Without meaningful and equal civil society participation, the WTO’s ‘Public Forum’ risks becoming nothing more than a public-relations exercise. A public forum without the public is not a public forum.” **Rahmat Maulana Sidik, Executive Director, Indonesia for Global Justice (IGJ)**

“Africa must have a meaningful seat at the table where international trade rules are shaped. It is concerning that legitimate African and Global South organisations representing farmers, workers, women, youth, small producers and affected communities have been excluded from organising sessions at this year’s WTO Public Forum. These voices bring perspectives that are often missing from formal trade-related discussions. Their exclusion limits meaningful participation and undermines the diversity of perspectives needed to shape trade policies that directly affect our economies and livelihoods. The WTO must ensure that its engagement platforms, including the Public Forum, are genuinely inclusive and provide greater space for Global South organisations to participate, contribute and advance Global South voices in shaping the international trading system.” **Ms. Jane Nalunga, Executive Director, Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI)**

“I am deeply worried about the undemocratic developments at the WTO. We need now more than ever to hear the voices of civil society organizations, especially now that authoritarian powers are on the rise and developing countries/Global South countries are under more pressure than ever.” **Eline Melby Lorentsen, deputy chair person, the Norwegian Trade Campaign**

"It is genuinely troubling that this year's Forum offers so little space for opposing

voices — without that contrast, there can be no real debate about where the multilateral trading system is heading. Budget constraints and shorter schedules are real limitations, but when choices have to be made, they should protect space for civil society. That was the Public Forum's reason for being in the first place." **Sofia Scasserra, Associated Researcher, GFNE / TNI**

"The WTO launched the Public Forum to appear responsive to protests of corporate globalization — but now there is no longer even a pretense of the WTO's supposedly "public" forum facilitating debate across a variety of perspectives. It's a perfect reflection of the opacity of the WTO itself, where rich countries dominate in private "green room" negotiations, sidelining developing countries and excluding the public entirely." **Melanie Foley, Global Trade Watch Deputy Director, Public Citizen**

ABOUT OWINFS

The "Our World Is Not For Sale" (OWINFS) network is a loose grouping of organizations and social movements of public interest groups, development advocates, farmer and fisherfolk networks, environmental organisations, trade unions, and other civil society, from the global north and south, worldwide fighting the current model of corporate globalization embodied in the global trading system. OWINFS is committed to a sustainable, socially just, democratic and accountable multilateral trading system. The network includes over 200 organisations worldwide. <https://owinfs.org/>

[Letter: Civil Society Participation in and Contribution to WTO Public Forum](#) (external link)

MEDIA CONTACTS

Anniken Storbakk
OWINFS co-facilitator

Vanessa Dourado
OWINFS co-facilitator

info@owinfs.org