



WTO Secretariat's Sidelining of Civil Society Continues at MC14 in Cameroon

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YAOUNDÉ – Since the inception of the WTO, civil society has been sidelined, barred from participating in or observing negotiations, as accredited NGOs are able to do in other intergovernmental organizations. Despite this, the Our World Is Not For Sale ([OWINFS](#)) network of civil society organizations (CSOs) and social movements has attended every WTO Ministerial Conference (MC) and steadfastly played an important role in bringing the concerns of regular people to the halls of power.

OWINFS and other civil society networks have held peaceful demonstrations at past ministerials, including [banners](#), [mic check actions](#), [street theater protests](#), and a [die-in](#) over COVID-19 TRIPS waiver opposition.

That history of bringing civil society's voice into the ministerials came to a crashing halt at MC13 in Abu Dhabi, with [OWINFS members detained](#), actions banned, and even distributing written materials prohibited. **(See table below)**. OWINFS has repeatedly beseeched the Director-General at MC13 [and since](#) to include in the WTO's host government contracts that basic CSO activities be explicitly permitted.

OWINFS had been assured by the WTO Secretariat that the long tradition of peaceful demonstrations would be possible in MC14. On that basis, OWINFS members made the decision that it was worthwhile to attend MC14, travelled to Cameroon at considerable expense at a time of significant cuts to CSOs funding, and paid to print banners and brought them to Cameroon.

Then late at night on 25/3/2026 (the night before MC14 began) the WTO Secretariat relayed that no banners or actions would be permitted. This applies throughout the venue (in the building, outside the building, on the driveways from the gate to the building, etc.) and even includes silently holding signage. Flyers left on tables in the venue have been confiscated.

OWINFS calls on Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the Director-General of the WTO to fulfill her responsibility to ensure that basic international standards of free speech and public participation are permitted at their meetings, as they are in [other international fora](#).

Quotes From OWINFS Members:

"I came to MC14 to represent 5 million Indian farmers who need the WTO to agree to a permanent solution on public food stockholding program so our farmers can earn basic livelihoods and can continue to produce food. But our voices have been silenced because the WTO Secretariat during the term of Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala no longer ensures that standard CSO activities at WTO MCs like peaceful demonstrations and even banners are permitted." – **K V Biju, Rashtriya Kisan Mahasangh**

"Ensuring the effective participation of civil society—which entails not merely presence but also freedom of expression—is the exercise of democracy and the defense of an international system

that is transparent and fair. – **Priscilla Papagiannis, Brazilian Network for People's Integration (REBRIP)**

“Since the 1999 Battle in Seattle, I have experienced the WTO shrinking space for civil society yet Yaounde seems to be where trade justice advocates will be silently suffocated. With the WTO losing more legitimacy even among its own Members, squashing democratic debate further decreases its public trust.” – **Victor Menotti, Demand Climate Justice and lead plaintiff, in ACLU’s Menotti v Seattle case**

“This is the sixth Ministerial Conference that I have attended, and under the current Director General there has been a clear erosion of the space available for civil society to voice the concerns of their communities at the MC. This is the premier decision making process for the WTO but civil society is being shut out.” – **Prof. Jane Kelsey (emerita), University of Auckland**

“The WTO Secretariat was well aware of the difficulties civil society faced in the last Ministerial. Instead of following through on the promise to facilitate free speech, it seems the Secretariat is allowing the previous repression to become precedent to stymie peaceful protest at all future WTO Ministerials.” – **Melanie Foley, Global Trade Watch Deputy Director, Public Citizen**

Activities Permitted or Denied at Various WTO Ministerials

Civil Society Activities at WTO MCs	Allowed in MC 1-12?	Allowed in MC13?	Allowed in MC14?
Distributing informational flyers	YES	NO	YES
Handing a paper to a reporter you know	YES	NO	YES
Speaking with delegates as they enter negotiating rooms	YES	NO	YES
Silently holding signs	YES	NO	NO
Displaying banners	YES	NO	NO
Chanting about the negotiations	YES	NO	NO
Taking actions where delegates can see	YES	NO	NO
Taking photos of our actions	YES	NO	-
Filming according to the WTO Secretariat's instructions	YES	NO	-
Wearing traditional Palestinian Kuffiyeh	YES	NO	YES

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