

Report on the WTO Public Forum 2023: "It is Time for Action"



The World Trade Organization (WTO) held its annual Public Forum from September 12-15, 2023. This event brought together a diverse array of stakeholders, including policymakers, industry leaders, academics, and civil society representatives, to foster open dialogue and promote multilateral cooperation. This year's forum, titled "It is Time for Action," featured 134 sessions organized by WTO member governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations, academia, and

international organizations. Many of the sessions were [livestreamed](#) on the WTO website.

Day 1: September 12, 2023

The forum kicked off with a stage-setting session featuring high-level speakers, including WTO's Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Thani Al Zeyoudi, the Minister of State for Foreign Trade of the UAE and Chair of the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference. This special session, titled "**Conversations on the Trade, Global Economy, and Climate Change Nexus**", placed a spotlight on the critical role of trade in supporting climate action. Discussions centered on the potential of trade to create new economic opportunities, support a just transition, and contribute to sustainable development.

Key trends in trade were highlighted, including geopolitical tensions reshaping globalization, the digitalization of trade (with an 8% annual increase in digitally delivered services), and the impact of climate change on trade patterns and production. The session underscored the WTO's role in addressing climate change through trade, emphasizing that trade is part of the solution by facilitating the movement of green goods and services, setting relevant standards through trade agreements, encouraging green procurement, and reducing carbon footprints through trade facilitation and e-documentation.

The speakers also touched upon the expectations for the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13), with a focus on delivering outcomes that benefit both people and the planet. Three key areas were highlighted for action: WTO reform, development, and negotiations. These areas encompassed reforming the WTO's engagement process, revitalizing the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), addressing the graduation of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), improving special and differential treatment provisions (S&DT), finalizing the fisheries agreement, ensuring food security, and advancing digital trade.

In the subsequent session, **Ralph Ossa, WTO's Chief Economist**, introduced the [World Trade Report 2023](#), emphasizing the advantages of broader, more inclusive economic integration. This perspective was particularly relevant in light of early signs of trade fragmentation that could pose challenges to global growth and development. The report stressed the pivotal role of "re-globalization", defined as increased international cooperation and broader integration, in promoting security, inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability.

Chief Economist Mr. Ossa noted that while current data may not definitively support the existence of ongoing friend-shoring and deglobalization, the rise of nationalism and protectionism has undeniably fueled negative narratives. These narratives have the potential to shape trade policy, potentially leading to deglobalization. He emphasized that the current multilateral system is at a critical crossroads, where the possibility of deglobalization carries significant adverse consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable. The upcoming WTO trade forecast in October may provide valuable insights into the future of global trade. More of Mr. Ossa's views and analysis are available [here](#).

A Presidential Lecture by Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown concluded the first day, where he provided invaluable perspectives on the intersection of trade, technology, and inclusive development. Mr. Brown emphasized the need for a new multilateralism. He pointed out that the failure of the G20 to agree on crucial matters like climate financing and AI regulation, combined with geopolitical shifts and the rise of nationalism, calls for a new approach. Mr. Brown discussed three key shifts: a move from unipolar to multipolar dynamics, a shift away from neoliberalism towards policy-driven economies, and a re-evaluation of hyper-globalism in favor of self-interest and nationalism. In response to these profound shifts, the Prime Minister stressed the importance of well-managed, inclusive cooperation and the need for reform in multilateral institutions to address global challenges collectively.

Day 2: September 13, 2023

The second day of the forum featured several notable sessions, including "**Forging Trade for a Sustainable Future**". This high-level session explored the creation of incentives for sustainable practices, such as the removal of tariffs for green goods, transfer of green technologies and addressing carbon emissions. Participants discussed the complexities of subsidies and the need to avoid discouraging organic and green production. Collaboration between private and public environmental groups was highlighted, and Ecuador's efforts to launch a circular economy law were showcased.

During the "**Trade Winds with Cecilia Malmstrom**" session, discussions centered on the significant challenges associated with dispute settlement and negotiations within the WTO. Key topics included the role of Deep Trade Agreements (DTAs), the widespread use of national security exceptions, and the necessity to reconsider subsidies agreements. This session underscored the importance of striking a balance between judicial and legislative methods for resolving disputes and the urgency of finding a political balance to break the cycle of distrust within the WTO.

Day 3: September 14, 2023

The third day featured a session on "**Accelerating eCERT Adoption**" organized by the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) and the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation (GATF). This session discussed the progress and challenges in implementing electronic certification (e-cert) systems. It emphasized the importance of legal frameworks, stakeholder training, and private-sector involvement. The session also addressed concerns related to system costs, government technology adoption, data requirements, and the integration of AI into certification processes.

Another session focused on how deep trade agreements influence non-trade outcomes, based on research by the World Bank. The discussion highlighted the increasing inclusion of provisions related to non-trade objectives in trade agreements, such as environmental and labor standards. It was noted that very deep agreements can significantly boost trade, but careful consideration is needed to prevent unintended consequences.

Day 4: September 15, 2023

The final day of the forum featured sessions on agriculture in China and sustainable agricultural innovation in Argentina. The session titled "**Agriculture in China: Green Development and Inclusive Opening-up**" showcased China's efforts to promote green and low-carbon agriculture, particularly in the context of the Paris Agreement. Policies and technologies aimed at reducing carbon emissions and ensuring food security were discussed. The role of trade in achieving these goals, as well as the importance of avoiding trade barriers, was emphasized.

The session on sustainable **agricultural innovation in Argentina** featured Dr. Raquel Chan's presentation on crop innovations resistant to droughts and flooding, such as HB4 wheat, developed through collaborative efforts involving scientists, agronomists, and public-private cooperation. Additionally, the Argentine No-Till Farmers Association (Aapresid) showcased their 25-year journey in sustainable farming practices, particularly their successful implementation of a No-Till System (NTS). This system not only increased crop production but also played a pivotal role in environmental preservation, underlining the potential of sustainable farming to simultaneously boost productivity and conserve the environment.

In addition, the last session of the Public Forum featured a presentation of a recent WTO publication "[International Export Regulations and Controls](#)" that explores how WTO member countries utilize international agreements and conventions outside the WTO to implement export regulations. The publication highlights that chemical products are the most frequently affected by export-related measures, followed by optical instruments, machinery, and pharmaceuticals. These regulations aim to achieve objectives such as environmental protection, hazardous waste management, weapons control, and combatting illegal drug trade. The publication examines how these export-related frameworks beyond the WTO operate in practice and their connection to the multilateral trading system.

Conclusion

The WTO Public Forum 2023, under the theme "It is Time for Action," provided a platform for meaningful discussions on critical issues related to trade, sustainability, technology, and multilateralism. The sessions and insights shared during the forum underscored the need for collaborative and inclusive approaches to address global challenges. As the world faces a changing landscape marked by geopolitical tensions, digitalization, and the imperative of climate action, the WTO remains a vital forum for dialogue and action in support of global trade and cooperation.