

WTO: TRADING AWAY AFRICA



EcoNews Africa



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DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN WTO

In order to draw attention to the untransparent and undemocratic decision making process in WTO and at the Ministerial Conferences, a campaign has been launched by a number of NGOs with offices in Geneva. EcoNews Africa, Heinrich Böll Foundation and Oxfam GB fully endorse their call to WTO Members to meet the democracy challenge:

THE CANCUN DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE

WTO members have still not resolved a series of fundamental issues regarding decision-making processes at the WTO and at Ministerial Conferences. The negotiation process towards Cancun has been characterized by an increased lack of transparency, fairness and democratic decision-making. It is time for WTO Members, especially the most powerful, to meet the democracy challenge.

Do you believe in a fair, transparent, democratic and just world trading system? If so, will you advocate for the following key conditions for democratic decision-making for the 5th WTO Ministerial in Cancun, Mexico?

- The “informal” green room meetings including “Mini-ministerials” in the preparatory process of Cancun must be stopped. We consider this to be a breach of the multilateral process to which the WTO espouses.
- All negotiating texts which are forwarded to or prepared in Cancun, must be produced by the membership, and all members should have the opportunity to effectively participate in the drafting, revision and approval. Differences in positions should be fairly reflected as options for example by the use of square brackets. Chairpersons must not present any documents ‘on his/her own responsibility’ since this destroys the ‘Member-driven’ and multilateral nature of the institution.
- The agenda and any draft texts to be used as the basis for negotiations must be approved by the entire membership at a formal General Council meeting prior to the Ministerial in Cancun, and confirmed at a formal first business meeting in Cancun.
- Members as a whole should decide if there are to be chairs or facilitators to conduct discussions on certain issues at the Ministerial, and if so they should elect these chairs or facilitators at a formal General Council meeting in Geneva before Cancun. Clear rules on the role of these chairs and procedural guidelines on how the Ministerial discussions will be conducted must be decided by all Members in such a formal meeting.

- The assembly of all members i.e. the Committee of the Whole, must be the forum for negotiations at the Ministerial. Drafting of texts and decisions must be made in that forum in a transparent way, for example with the use of a big screen as in some UN conferences, in the presence of the Membership. Differences in positions can be negotiated in break-out meetings which all Members are informed about and which are open to all Members.
- All meetings must be inclusive and transparent. The practice of the “Green Room”, or exclusive meetings to which only a few countries are invited, must be stopped. No Member may be excluded from meetings. Each member-state must be free to appoint the officials it wants as its representatives, as well as to decide the number of representatives it wants to have at each meeting.
- All meetings must be announced at least six hours in advance to the entire membership through a daily calendar including necessary information such as the room, the chair and the issues to be covered.
- During Ministerials, there must be cut-off time in the evenings beyond which meetings cannot be held, e.g. 10 p.m. This is to cater to small delegations that have no capacity to stagger their human resources and to ensure that Ministers of small delegations do not make decisions when they are completely exhausted in order to end the meetings (e.g. 38 hour meetings at a stretch as in Doha).
- When new language is proposed during the Ministerial meeting, the member/s proposing the language must be indicated.
- Any proposal to extend the Ministerial meeting or to amend its agenda or other ministerial processes should be decided upon by all the Members in a General Assembly or Committee of the Whole.
- Issues outside of the WTO’s agenda (such as preferential access arrangements, aid, debt etc.) must not be brought into the negotiations and held hostage to achieve a Ministerial outcome.
- The Secretariat should maintain neutrality during the Ministerial.

It is a sad testament to the failure of the most powerful WTO Members to address the institution’s un-transparent procedures that the 12 proposals outlined above -the most basic building blocks for democratic decision-making – have until now been ignored or rejected. It is time to learn the lessons from Seattle and Doha. Failing to uphold each of these basic procedures for democratic decision-making will continue to delegitimise the outcomes of the WTO. Moreover, the WTO will continue to be criticized for fundamentally being an organization for the interests of the strongest members of the world trading system.

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