



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 28, 2024

Contact: Deborah James, *contact information redacted in this online version*

WTO Loses Legitimacy as Affected Communities, CSOs Shut Out of Normal Participation at MC13 in Abu Dhabi

Given Unprecedented Repression of Participants, MC13 Should Not Continue Until Historical and International Standards and Human Rights for Participation in Global Governance are Restored

Abu Dhabi - A day after filing a complaint* to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Director General about several incidents of detainment, confiscation of materials, and heavy-handed restrictions on lobbying by civil society organizations (CSOs) at the Ministerial Conference, participants have faced an escalation in repression - despite fully complying with the WTO's guidelines for the conference.

Two participants, who have been advised not to release their names publicly while still in country, were detained, allegedly for 'filming' within the convention centre. This continues a disturbing trend for this Ministerial Conference. The WTO has failed to ensure the safety and rights of participants that it has registered for this meeting. This incident happened during a public civil society event where affected community groups - fishers from developing countries - were discussing the negotiations that would directly impact them.

If the WTO is currently unable or unwilling to ensure the safety and rights of the participants, then the meeting should not continue until that is the case. As they stand, negotiations are proceeding on agenda items without possibilities of any democratic engagement from affected communities and civil society.

The WTO Director General, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, has billed this Ministerial as the most "open, transparent and inclusive process" to date. Yet her institution is failing to ensure participants that the guiding information communicated by the WTO, and the prevailing practice with regards to what civil society can do, actually holds for MC13. This is putting the safety of civil society participants at risk, and denying their rights, with little being done to substantively address this extremely urgent and serious issue.

"Participants, especially from developing countries, are fearful of even walking alone in the conference centre now, lest they be unjustly detained and possibly deported, and then unable to secure visas ever again. This climate of fear should not be the result of advocacy in an institution of global economic governance," said Rahmat Maulana Sidik, Executive Director of Indonesia for Global Justice.

"This is my 11th MC and I've never seen anything like this level of repression. The WTO Secretariat has insisted that it is working towards clarifying things with the host country. But we see no evidence that the DG - who is widely known as a person who, shall we say, can get her way when she wants - is insisting on our rights being restored." said Deborah James, facilitator of the global Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS) network of CSOs.

"It was a long way to Abu Dhabi from my country. I came here to get work done, and I do not feel safe to do the normal activities that I always do in Ministerial Conferences. The uncertainty of not knowing if I will be detained just for giving away my research is paralyzing me from doing what I am supposed to do," said Sofia Scasserra, researcher from Argentina with the Transnational Institute.

CSOs have been told by several delegations, including from Norway, New Zealand, and the United States, that they have raised this issue with the secretariat, but there is no evidence that the WTO has taken action.

The inclusion of civil society has been mentioned frequently at this Ministerial as being central to the WTO, yet civil society members are being prevented from undertaking their work, advocating for communities affected by the outcomes of the Ministerial, on account of the participants being subject to repressive measures. There should be nothing agreed about us at this Ministerial without us.

A comparison between activities at MC13 and previous Ministerials is below. CSOs previously documented repression, “NGOs call for free speech to be restored at WTO Ministerial in UAE,” available at https://ourworldisnotforsale.net/2024-02-26_R_free_speech.

Civil Society Activities	Previous Ministerials	MC13
Distributing informational flyers	YES	NO
Handing a paper to a reporter you know	YES	NO
Holding signs	YES	NO
Chanting about the negotiations	YES	NO
Displaying banners	YES	NO
Taking photos of our actions	YES	NO
Speaking with delegates as they enter negotiating rooms	YES	NO
Taking actions in areas where delegates can see	YES	NO
Filming according to the instructions	YES	NO
Wearing traditional Palestinian Kuffiyeh	YES	NO

*Letter to DG from CSOs: https://ourworldisnotforsale.net/2024/2024-02-26_L_DG.pdf

More than 50 civil society representatives are in person at MC13 working with the global Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS) network including farmers, fisherfolk, development advocates, environmentalists, and public interest organizations, coming from 21 countries: Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Spain, Switzerland, Uganda, the United States, and Zimbabwe; two Nigerians were denied visas. *Contacts for civil society experts present in Abu Dhabi for the WTO’s MC13 are available, but redacted in this online version.*

A summary of What’s at Stake at the WTO’s 13th Ministerial, including links to letters and analysis from many of the organizations, can be seen at this QR code to the right.

OWINFS is a network of organizations and social movements worldwide fighting the current model of corporate globalization embodied in the global trading system of the WTO. www.ourworldisnotforsale.net #

