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## Abu Dhabi: WTO Ministerial Conference Chronicle of Failure Foretold

Dehumanizing wars, expanding hunger, climate on the verge of explosion. Behind the current global crisis is also the failure of international institutions. These include the World Trade Organization (WTO).



The 13th WTO Ministerial Conference has just been held between 26 February and 1 March in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, without being able to unblock the paralysis that the organization has suffered over the last decade. Due to its deep internal tensions, the WTO has failed to reach new multilateral trade agreements since 2013.



Opening session of the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi. Photo: [WTO The Ministerial Conference](#), which is usually convened every two years, is the WTO's most important decision-making body and brings together representatives of member states, who can adopt resolutions relevant to any multilateral trade agreement.

This latest 2024 edition was held within the framework of strict security regulations that prevented any protests. A broad platform of non-governmental organizations denounced from Abu Dhabi the detention for a few hours of an anti-globalist activist who distributed pamphlets criticizing the international institution

"The unprecedented persecution of civil society organizations shows how critical it is to silence voices that dissent from the free trade agenda, because their arguments are robust and accurate," said Sofia Scasserra of the Transnational Institute (TNI) from Abu Dhabi. It is essential to ensure the participation of civil society "so that increasingly balanced results can be achieved in favor of developing countries," he added in a telephone interview.

### **Nothing new under the sun**

The conveners of the Ministerial aspired to some kind of progress in sectors such as agriculture, e-commerce, fisheries and internal institutional reforms. However, on the night of Friday, March 1, and despite a one-day extension of the event, no substantial progress was confirmed.



La Via Campesina called for mobilization against the new WTO Ministerial Conference.  
Photo: LVC

The Swiss news agency ATS/Keystone reported, "The World Trade Organization (WTO) is heading for total failure, barring any last-minute surprises." And he added that, according to convergent sources consulted, "the institution is facing a serious crisis" and considered the Ministerial Conference as "a disaster".

At the end of the conference, Sofia Scasserra, from TNI, confirmed that it "resulted in a failure in the negotiations on investment facilitation, and subsidies for fisheries and agriculture, among others." From the same Abu Dhabi conference, he recalled that the WTO does not recognize the importance of public policy, especially in countries of the global South.

The historical contradictions between the countries of the North and those of the South (and sometimes also within those same geopolitical spaces), as well as the consensus clause that defines the functioning of this organization, were some of the obstacles that prevented the paralysis from being unblocked.



Protests against the WTO have been on the agenda of the anti-globalisation movement for 20 years. Photo: Via Campesina

No less important was the criticism and frontal mobilization against the WTO promoted by important trade unions, peasant sectors and NGOs. Nothing new, although it is updated, if we take into account the powerful mobilizations against the WTO in very different regions of the planet in the last 25 years. For several decades, the WTO has been a front-line enemy against which anti-globalist and anti-globalist protests have been waged in recent decades.

In 2001, the WTO launched the so-called "Doha Cycle", an ambitious programme to liberalise the world economy with disastrous consequences, mainly for the countries of the Global South.

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consensus clause, without which the WTO cannot reach agreements, is almost impossible to achieve when it comes to aligning representatives of the 166 member states on the same footing. Nor does the current political climate help to find solutions on an issue as sensitive as world trade. As Nigerian economist Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, president of the institution, said at the opening of the event on February 26: "Uncertainty and instability are pervasive."



One of the key challenges at stake at the Ministerial Conference has been, and continues to be, the reform of the WTO itself. In particular, the implementation of a dispute resolution system, paralyzed since 2019 following the blockade by the United States. According to its proponents, this appellate body should be implemented during the second part of 2024. To date, at least three dozen international trade disputes are awaiting a decision. Because of this ineffectiveness, the WTO is unable to ensure the exercise of the right of its members, as many States have pointed out.

On Monday the 26th, at the beginning of the meeting, there were many government representatives who hoped to achieve a methodological proposal, something like a "road map" that would open the doors to an internal reform to unblock the paralysis of the organization. The possibility that Donald Trump will be re-elected president of the United States next November is not without a concern. During his previous term, Trump engaged in an open trade confrontation with China and hampered the WTO's path, limiting its ability to resolve disputes. He even threatened to withdraw from the organization, as he had done in October 2017 when he left the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).



Social movements took to the streets of Geneva, Switzerland, to protest against the World Trade Organization. Photo: La Via Campesina

### Persistent paralysis

Isolda Agazzi, a Swiss expert on international trade and spokesperson for the Alliance Sud (a platform of Swiss NGOs for development cooperation), points out that "in two decades, the world has changed profoundly". Moreover, that India, South Africa and other major nations that still benefit from their status as "developing countries" no longer allow themselves to be imposed by the "developed countries", in particular the United States and the European Union.



Working session of the WTO Ministerial Conference on the day before (Wednesday, 28 February). Photo: WTO

According to Agazzi, in order to circumvent the current obstacle and paralysis, several nations, especially developed ones, "[are intensifying plurilateral initiatives](#) (i.e., bringing together various nations or regions) [in comprehensive arenas](#)." [The Investment Facilitation Initiative](#), whose discussions began at the Buenos Aires Ministerial Conference in 2017, is the most advanced. Sponsored by China and supported by 70 countries, it currently brings together 110 nations, many of them developing.

#### **Criticism from all sides**

As soon as the Abu Dhabi agenda was announced, important voices of international civil society intensified their warnings, mistrust and criticism of this new Ministerial Conference. They expressed their concerns that countries might be forced to open their doors to foreign investment without any possibility of controlling it or framing it within a vision of genuine development. In addition, even more rights should be granted to multinationals.

The International Federation of Public Service Workers (PSI), which brings together 30 million members from 700 unions and 154 countries, published an internal circular on 22 February emphasising its opposition to the proposed adoption of a new Investment Facilitation Agreement as too broad and also limiting the power of action of member states.



According to the PSI, this Agreement, which would provide investment codes, public-private partnership laws, licensing procedures and requirements, technical standards, central bank regulations, and administrative measures and procedures, among others, does not take into account the views of many governments and public authorities. "Rarely, if ever," the PSI argues, "[governments] are consulted on trade rules that restrict their ability to stimulate local economies and regulate investment so that we enjoy the quality public services we need."

Other key policy areas that could be constrained by the definitions that emerged from this Conference are the environment and human rights. In the specific case of the environment, the International Federation of Trade Unions argues that "at a time when we are facing an urgent and vital transition to fairer, low-carbon local economies, our governments should not give up their ability to act and implement policies in the interests of people and the planet."

[This means that states must be able to increase their revenues, and if necessary, force foreign investors to pay more.](#) Unfortunately, the new rules under discussion include increased benefits for foreign investors, such as reductions in the costs of licensing fees, royalties and other obligations.

### **WTO torpedoes food sovereignty**

Coinciding with these critical voices, La Via Campesina, the main international network of small and medium-sized agricultural producers, called on its members for a week of mobilization against the WTO during its assembly in the Emirati capital.

La Via Campesina denounces the WTO's inability for more than a decade "to reach consensus on a lasting solution for public food stockpiles despite the fact that more than 80 developing countries have submitted detailed proposals." This clearly illustrates [the WTO's] alignment with the interests of the United States and other heavily export-oriented countries."



Via Campesina poster to protest against the 2022 WTO Ministerial Conference. According to La Via Campesina, the WTO ["has become a space where the Rule of Power prevails, with few developed countries determining the course of world trade."](#) And for this reason, he concludes, "despite the steadfastness of the Global South, it remains stuck in limbo, seemingly digging its own grave." And reiterates its opposition to all Free Trade Agreements that endanger a country's Food Sovereignty, undermine the autonomy and self-sufficiency of local economies, and have adverse effects on the lives, living conditions and wages of all workers, including migrants and women.

*Sergio Ferrari The Pen*

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