

**Twenty-seventh meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention  
(Geneva, 26 - 28 June 2023)**

**Item 6. Thematic session on the promotion of the principles of the Convention in  
international forums**

***Item II: International trade-related decision-making***

**Mr. Bernard Kuiten, Head of External Relations, World Trade Organization**

**WTO transparency and public participation**

History of WTO transparency and public involvement

- **1995** - establishment of WTO. Intergovernmental. Public participation and access were no issues yet – we were relatively unknown.
- **1996** – Guidelines for Arrangements on relations with NGOs, adopted by WTO General Council.
- **1998** – WTO Ministerial Conference Geneva. Public protests.
- **1999** – WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle. Everything changed.

**Growing awareness of the need to explain what WTO is and does. The idea of public participation was raised and discussed, but to no avail.**

The WTO Secretariat went forward

- **WTO Public Symposium**, now Forum, since 2001. The biggest outreach activity of the WTO.
- **Regular briefings** for journalists and civil society.
- **Separate webpages** for journalists, NGOs, business, parliamentarians and students.
- **Stakeholder specific outreach and training**, both in Geneva and abroad.

What facilitated access to information at multilateral level?

- **2002** – WTO members adopt a new procedure for **circulation and derestriction of documents**.

- **WTO website** – unlimited source of information, regularly complimented for its comprehensiveness.
- Active use of **social media** (facebook, youtube, twitter)

#### What about access to meetings/public participation?

- **WTO MCs** – NGOs and journalists can be accredited and have access to the regular proceedings of the Ministerial since 1996 in Singapore.
- **Dispute settlement** – since 2009, several WTO disputes have been open to the public, via hearings.
- **Parliamentary conference at WTO** – the IPU and EP organize their annual conference on WTO at the WTO premises or during MCs.
- **WTO Trade Dialogues since 2016** – informal, in-depth discussions between stakeholders and WTO members.

#### More recent developments

- **Advisory Groups** – WTO Director-General established advisory group for CSOs and business.
- **WTO Members growing interest in transparency** – a diverse group of members are suggesting that external stakeholder engagement at WTO can benefit and better inform discourse at WTO.
- **Transparency and public engagement** could become part of the discussion to reform and modernize the WTO.

#### Conclusion/Challenges

**Access to information** is no longer a contentious issue at WTO.

However, **public participation** remains restricted to the cases described earlier. Fuller access to WTO meetings or even negotiations is a matter for the WTO membership