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.


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.