Do you feel the MC13 process is inclusive for smaller developing countries and/or your organisation? Why or why not?

It looks like once again decisions will be made by a few powerful players behind closed doors, then presented to the conference as a fait accompli. Doha Round commitments made over 20 years ago to move forward with a development agenda and the core principles of special and differential treatment for developing countries remain sidelined. The scheduled discussion to extend the already-diluted relaxations on rules surrounding vaccines, diagnostics and treatments looks unlikely to even be held, despite receiving overwhelming support from developing countries, unions and civil society. Instead, high income countries are pushing further trade liberalisation for the benefit of foreign investors through Joint Statement Initiatives (JSI) which are effectively plurilateral agreements in a multilateral forum. The recent withdrawals from the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) reveal this approach as a dead end.

How can the process be made more inclusive for smaller developing countries, non-member participants and non-state stakeholders?

The WTO must prioritize the promised development agenda and drop rules which promote privatisation and hinder actions to address the climate crisis and inequality.

The WTO must prioritize the promised development agenda and drop rules which promote privatisation and hinder actions to address the climate crisis and inequality. The WTO should review how existing rules increase inequalities, promote privatisation, and restrict access to quality public services and the medicines, technologies, data and other resources workers need. To restore the WTO’s reputation and ensure its continued existence, it’s time for leadership to take a stand against the powerful interests who see democratic decision making as an impediment to their goals.

The WTO must prioritize the promised development agenda and drop rules which promote privatisation and hinder actions to address the climate crisis and inequality.

What do you think are the main issues that MC13 is aiming to address? Are these important/relevant from your perspective?

The JSI on investment facilitation could allow investors to water down or block vital regulations which they see as impeding on their interests. These measures are extremely broad, covering any action related to foreign investment such as laws, environmental impact assessments, technical standards at all levels of government. This could further limit governments’ ability to make foreign investors contribute to the green transition through licensing fees, royalties and higher standards. Meanwhile proposals on data and digital trade mirror big tech demands, allowing firms to deepen their control over sensitive datasets generated by workers and public services. The WTO should drop its reductive approach to such regulation and support measures to keep big-tech in check. That’s why PSI and other trade deals are often less transparent processes and QPS and struggles to fight inequality. We have significant concerns with the WTO, but other trade deals are often less transparent and worse for workers and public services. The proposed Trade in Services Agreement, written up by corporate lobbyists, went far further than existing WTO measures. Yet by mobilizing unions across the world, we were able to stop a bad deal. The lesson is that by educating workers, building coalitions and articulating powerful alternatives, we can stand up to vested interests and push our governments to build a fairer multilateral trade system.
THE MEMORY BOWL

In this section, we take you back to previous WTO Ministerial Conferences. Like Dumbledore’s “Pensieve” in the famous books about Harry Potter, remembering the past can provide explanations of the present.

We need to reinvent the ideals of our fathers

November 1999 | WTO chief Mike Moore | ICFU conference

“(...) There is also a darker side to the backlash against globalization. For some, the attacks on economic openness are part of a broader assault on internationalism – on foreigners, immigration, a more pluralist and integrated world. (...) We need to invent the ideals of our fathers; of internationalism and solidarity for a new age of globalization, and to help build a new fresh, fair and generous framework of rules and labour for working people everywhere. The new century must be one of persuasion not coercion, with engagement through multilateral rules, agreements where our differences are settled fairly, through the law, which is the mandate of the WTO. It’s not perfect, it can be improved but the world would be a more stable and more dangerous place without it.”

WTO faces an identity crisis as Trump weighs going it alone

6 December 2017 | Shannon Donnan | The Financial Times, USA

The institution’s members are confronted by what many see as an assault on the postwar trading system. (...) Almost a year on, (...) the aluminium case brought by the Obama administration lays dormant, just one victim of the dramatic change in US trade policy that Mr Trump has orchestrated.

Armed with his instinctual suspicion of multilateral institutions, Mr Trump has expressed a clear preference for unilateral action and going around international institutions. (...) The result is that as trade ministers from the WTO’s 164 members gather in Buenos Aires on Sunday for their biennial conclave, they are confronting what many see as an accelerating existential crisis for both the two decades-old body and for the postwar trading system. (...) Roberto Azevêdo, the former Brazilian diplomat who serves as the WTO’s director-general, argues that if the US or other countries embarked on such a unilateral path they would risk “rewriting dangerous moments in economic history.” “The multilateral trading system is stronger than it was before, and, frankly, more needed than ever. And while we can certainly try to improve it, I have yet to hear any credible alternative to that particular system,” Azevêdo said. (...) WTO adopts Geneva package, disappoints LDCs

18 June 2022 | Doulat Akter Mala | The Financial Express, Bangladesh

Though the member countries of the World Trade Organization (WTO) finally reached a deal in Geneva concluding the 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) on Friday, it appears as a largely disappointing outcome for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) including Bangladesh.

LDCs’ hasty move to extend the trade benefit for a few more years after the graduation from the UN-defined status did not get the necessary support in the multilateral trade negotiation forum as some developed and advanced countries had not agreed on extending the post-grading benefits. Though the outcome document of the ministerial conference acknowledged the concerns and limitations of the LDCs in global trade, there is no binding commitment to provide some trade benefits for the time being in the post-grading era. (...)
WTO NEEDS COOPERATIVE APPROACHES

Alice Tipping, Director Trade and Sustainable Development, IISD

Do you feel the MC13 process is inclusive for smaller developing countries and/or your organisation? Why or why not?

When negotiations reach a Ministerial, they shift into warp speed. This makes it difficult for everyone, and especially difficult for small delegations which need to follow parallel discussions on many issues at once. Developing countries are included, but only a few are fortunate enough to have policy support to help them engage in the negotiations. For organisations like ours, it’s just as difficult to follow the many drafts being tabled and circulated on different topics, and we are not even in the room!

How can the process be made more inclusive for smaller developing countries, non-member participants and non-state stakeholders?

There are no simple solutions to the lack of capacity and resources that many small developing countries’ administrations struggle with. But making the negotiating process of the Ministerial, including sharing of information about when small group discussions are happening and on what topics would help, so that small delegations can prioritise their precious time as efficiently as possible.

What do you think is the main issue that MC13 is aiming to address? Are these important/relevant from your perspective?

MC13 is tackling a range of different issues at different levels. Some are immediate decisions for ministers. Agreeing on additional provisions to complete the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement would be a crucial step forward. Do you think that MC13 will be a success? Why or why not?

I think there is deal to be done on fisheries subsidies, if governments want to do it. The divides are political, but there are clear technical ways forward. The deal is not as ambitious an agreement as many, included I, wanted to see, but it’s a further good step forward and should be taken. I’m also hopeful that we could see a commitment to more focused discussion on key topics in agriculture, but governments will need to decide to trust each other to get there. The broader agenda-building work is a longer-term task, but the fact that discussions on the environment, on industrial policy and on inclusiveness are on the agenda is a good development that should be built on.

What will be the impact globally/on the multilateral trading system if MC13 fails?

The impact will be indirect, but important. Many large economies are moving towards unilateral measures rather than cooperative approaches, and are doing so (I believe) because they don’t see the WTO as providing a forum where collective approaches to environmental issues, in particular, can be developed. If MC13 does not deliver some cooperative outcomes, this sense that they have to “go it alone” will only deepen, and it will become even harder to eventually draw policy directions back together when the costs of fragmentation begin to bite.

WHAT IS THIS?

Are you wondering what kind of newspaper are you reading? Don’t worry, we’ll give you the answer. Back in 2022, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung invited twice trade and trade-plus experts to Chamonix, located at the foot of the Mont Blanc, to delineate future paths of the international trading architecture. These scenarios were launched at the WTO Public Forum 2022 and presented in a newspaper style called “The Mont Blanc Trade News”.

For this edition, we’ve stucked to the name; not because we did not find a better one. But, because to us it is a continuation of an unusual reporting for/about major WTO events. You will be able to read three issues of the “WTO MC13 Special Edition”, number one published just before the start of MC13, this one providing some views on the process and progress during the MC, and a third one a few weeks after MC13 with some takeaways and reflections on the MC outcome. We want you to read from countries and stakeholders themselves, some of who might for some reasons sometimes be overlooked and overheard during such major events.