

Global Trade: for the people, by the people

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WHY THE WORLD STILL NEEDS A RULES-BASED TRADING SYSTEM



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For those of us interested in trade issues and global trade sustainability, the [World Trade Organization \(WTO\) Public Forum](#), held yearly at the WTO Secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland is THE place to be in early Autumn. The event advances conversations around international trade topics by providing an opportunity for policy leaders from academia, business, and government to interact with the public, through simple online registration. Attendees get to engage in a public arena and exchange public policy questions, concerns, and ideas on advancing trade. It is a rare and excellent opportunity demonstrating people holding “power” accountable.

During the program’s [opening session](#), Roberto Azevedo, the WTO Executive Director said: “*Trade can sometimes seem a bit abstract, but in fact it’s anything but!*” Indeed! Trade is simply about doing business, sometimes domestically, sometimes across borders, and we are all affected by it. Today’s global supply chains bring raw materials to our local bakers, clothes to our nearest outlet mall, technology to our fingertips, as well as services from banking, to travel and jobs, that transcend borders. But, with the advent of the digital economy and the political disruption affecting who leads and who follows in trade, our way of trading is being entirely reshaped.

The theme for this Public Forum is “*Trading Forward: Adapting to a Changing World*”. It’s about how advances in trade, require the trading system to evolve. Many participants argued that in the context of a changing international trade environment, there are consequences when we give up the global accessibility we’ve become accustomed to. The unilateral trade actions of any one country jeopardizes the global advances made by many countries thus far, and even puts at risk the global community’s potential to meet many of the United Nations’ [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs).



According to the WTO, this year’s [Public Forum](#) is the biggest ever, with 3200 registered attendees, which translates to a 30% increase from last year’s Forum. That’s a big jump! It seems, the average citizen is even more enthused and concerned about the impact of trade’s digital era on their lives. Artificial intelligence,

machine learning, cross border flows of goods, services, and data... all can lead us to more prosperity, or more inequality and unrest. The issues, risks and opportunities must be worked out by the governments we vote for, the private sector we buy from, and the civil society organizations who represent us as we debate how we will work within the rules-based trading system. Otherwise, we’ll all need to quickly consider what alternatives we can offer for assuring our shared prosperity.

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