

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

# Public Forum 2022

Under the theme “Towards a sustainable and inclusive recovery: Ambition to action”, the 2022 Public Forum was held from 27 to 30 September in the WTO. Nearly 1,300 participants attended in person. A total of 147 sessions were organized, including three high-level sessions.



## Multiple crises require new thinking

In conversation with CNN anchor Richard Quest on the opening day, DG Okonjo-Iweala highlighted how the Public Forum was taking place at a difficult time for both global trade and the world economy against a backdrop of geopolitical instability and climate crises. These challenges will require new approaches, she said.

“It's not business as usual because the world is in a very difficult place at this time,” the DG said. “We have a situation in which we are grappling with multiple crises, which I often refer to as a polycrisis, simultaneous exogenous shocks hitting the world.”

In a subsequent plenary debate on the Forum theme of sustainable and inclusive recovery, a high-level panel of experts from civil society, the private sector and international organizations discussed some of the major challenges facing policymakers: recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of future pandemics, and climate change adaptation and mitigation.

## Leveraging technology to promote inclusive growth

Another high-level debate, involving civil society organizations and the private sector,

explored how technology can be a catalyst for inclusive growth. The discussions underlined the importance of levelling the playing field for digital access so that digitalization can be a key driver of economic growth.

Thousands of African companies used digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic to broaden their consumer base and to reach many more economies, speakers noted. There is a massive potential for African businesses to seize digital opportunities, they added.

Highlighting the important role of trade rules, speakers pointed to the ongoing e-commerce negotiations (see page 65) at the WTO. If rule makers can put in place the right rules for e-commerce, not just developed economies but developing economies will benefit, they said.

## Delivering a trade agenda for a sustainable future

Representatives from international organizations, the private sector and academia shared their views on ways of “Delivering a Trade Agenda for a Sustainable Future”. During the session on this topic, the need to think radically and break silos between trade and environment was stressed to help the international community take on board that trade is part of the solution to climate change.

Panellists agreed that international organizations, governments, businesses and civil society must coordinate to update WTO rules written more than a quarter of a century ago when the environmental crisis was far less pressing.

To recognize the milestone of an agreement on fisheries subsidies (see page 55) in June 2022 and to encourage its prompt entry into force, a photo exhibition entitled “Let's save an exhausted ocean” portrayed the dangers



## 1,300

Nearly 1,300 participants attended the Public Forum in person

## Background

The Public Forum is the WTO's largest annual outreach event. It provides a unique platform for heads of states, parliamentarians, businesspeople, students, academics and civil society to come together and debate a wide range of trade and development topics.



resulting from fish stock depletion. The exhibition was co-organized with the Stop Funding Overfishing Coalition.

### **Overcoming barriers for women entrepreneurs**

A high-level session showcased the experiences of women entrepreneurs, highlighting the importance of an inclusive economic recovery. Women-owned businesses have faced higher barriers since the outbreak of COVID-19, adding to long-standing challenges, such as lack of access to finance and gender bias.

To overcome barriers keeping women out of international markets, DG Okonjo-Iweala called for “active trade policies that ensure non-discrimination and that help women

access global value chains”. She added: “With the right tools to compete and the right policies, women can break the glass ceiling in trade.”

### **Involving youth**

A session on 30 September – “The Missing Peace” – looked at how to involve youth in trade, policymaking and peacebuilding for a more sustainable future. More than a third of the world’s 1.8 billion young people live in fragile and conflict-affected states, where opportunities for education and jobs are extremely limited. The DG stressed that trade could play an important role in breaking the vicious circles of poverty, frustration and conflict in these countries and in increasing opportunities for young people.

DG Okonjo-Iweala in conversation with CNN Anchor Richard Quest at the 2022 Public Forum.