

# Abandon talks for big data rules at WTO, say over 300 CSOs

By Kanaga Raja, Third World Network



*In the spring of 2019, members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) began negotiations on a binding international framework on what is known as “e-commerce”. The WTO has previously defined e-commerce rather narrowly. Yet as the digital economy develops, the notion of e-commerce has now become much more extensive. The concept now covers what many describe as the “lifeblood of the digital economy” – namely, **control of data**.*

*As a response to the negotiation, the international network “Our World is Not for Sale” (OWINFS) facilitated a global letter that was sent to all members of the WTO. In the letter, they call for the end of the negotiations, noting that such an international agreement would pave the way for corporations to secure even more rights to privatize and control data. This would thus give the Big Tech corporations and their host countries even more rights to transfer data without restrictions for private profit. They argue that human, labour, consumer, economic, and civil rights must apply equally in the digital sphere without being constrained as “barriers to trade”.*

*In this month’s “Voices from the South”, Kanaga Raja (Malaysia) of Third World Network (TWN) introduces the letter that was endorsed by over 300 civil society organizations in 90+ countries. Both OWINFS efforts, as well as TWN’s WTO Monitoring efforts, are supported by Karibu. A version of this text previously appeared in TWN’s South-North Development Monitor (SUNS) #8879. See: <http://www.twn.my/title2/unsd/2019/unsd190401.htm>*

A number of civil society organisations (CSOs) have expressed their **profound and urgent opposition to the proposed negotiations on e-commerce at the World Trade Organisation**, which if concluded, could result in the full liberalization of the entire digital economy, and thus represent a back-door attempt to achieve a “WTO 2.0”.



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In a letter to WTO members, the over 300 CSOs from 90 countries across the world underlined that developing countries must develop their own agenda for digital industrialization.

They must not advance the “e-commerce rules” that were developed by transnational companies like Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Alibaba to

further their own interests, said the CSOs.

The CSOs urged WTO members **“to abandon their push for digital trade negotiations in the WTO and focus urgently on transforming global trade rules for shared prosperity for all.”**

Some 55 international and regional CSOs have signed onto the letter including amongst others the ACP Civil Society Forum; Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND); East Africa Trade Union Confederation; Focus on the Global South; Global Alliance for Tax Justice; Global Policy Forum; IBON International; International Trade Union Confederation; Just Net Coalition; LDC Watch; Public Services International; Southern and Eastern Africa Trade, Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI); Tax Justice Network Africa; Third World Network-Africa; and the Transnational Institute.

A host of national organisations have also signed on to the CSO letter.

The letter was facilitated by Our World is Not For Sale (OWINFS), and it includes **11 central conclusions for advocacy and action:**

1. There is a need for appropriate democratic governance on data, not unlimited power over data by Big Tech.
2. Data policies that put public interest first are essential for economic development and prosperity in all countries.
3. Strong consumer protections, privacy, and rights would be jeopardized by “e-commerce” rules.
4. Digital policies must promote decent jobs for shared prosperity; they should not reduce

workers’ power.

5. Anti-monopoly regulations and actions are urgently needed, in jurisdictions outside of the WTO.
6. Digital liberalization would decimate development and increase poverty in developing countries
7. Digital Industrialization is urgently needed to foster development and Small and medium-sized enterprises.
8. Fairer taxation would be severely constrained by proposed e-commerce rules in the WTO.
9. We need policies to promote innovation, small businesses, and security, not more patent monopolies.
10. Countries need policy space; the e-commerce agenda is promoting harmful total liberalization.
11. We need a new agenda for digital economic policies, and for the global economy.

The rules proposed by Big Tech transnational corporations (TNCs) go far beyond “e-commerce” and have implications for all aspects of domestic as well as the global economy, even for countries not participating, notes the letter.

The full letter from 315 CSOs from 90+ countries against Digital Trade talks in the WTO (April 1, 2019) can be download here:

- **English:** [http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.net/2019/Digital\\_trade\\_2019-04-01-en.pdf](http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.net/2019/Digital_trade_2019-04-01-en.pdf)
- **Spanish:** [http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.net/2019/Digital\\_trade\\_2019-04-01-es.pdf](http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.net/2019/Digital_trade_2019-04-01-es.pdf)
- **French:** [http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.net/2019/Digital\\_trade\\_2019-04-01-fr.pdf](http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.net/2019/Digital_trade_2019-04-01-fr.pdf)

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