

Review of
Martin Khor, *Battles in the WTO: Negotiations and Outcomes of the WTO Ministerial Conferences*

(Third World Network, 2020)

< https://twnshop.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=78_65&products_id=552 >

Review by Richard Hill, June 2023

The first Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) that I attended was the [Twelfth Conference](#), held in Geneva, Switzerland from 12 to 17 June 2022. I was astonished at how the newly-elected Director-General bullied developing countries into accepting proposals from developed countries that they had strenuously objected to prior to the conference; and at the (for me amazing) disregard of procedures that are followed in all the other international organizations whose meetings I have attended: in particular, proposals were adopted at 04h00 (when delegates had been convened at 02h00 after the conference was extended for two days) even though some of the proposals were not available in print nor on the web, so many delegates hadn't seen some of the texts proposed for approval.

Having participated (both as staff and as a delegate) in many meetings of other international organizations, I was shocked and stunned. "How can people accept such improper procedures", I thought to myself.

In February 2023, a friend gave me the book which I am reviewing here. I was again astonished: what I saw in Geneva is accepted practice in WTO Ministerial Conferences. Developed countries either succeed in getting their positions adopted, or they block attempts by developing countries to get their own positions adopted. If negotiations are blocked, they get unblocked at the Ministerial Conference immediately following the election of a new Director-General (normally every eight years), because the newly elected Director-General takes advantage the legitimacy afforded by having just been elected to bully developing countries into accepting the positions of developed countries.

Khor's excellent book consists of chapters devoted to each of the eleven Ministerial Conferences that took place prior to the Twelfth Conference. The book documents in detail how (quoting from the Preface): "From the WTO's establishment in 1995, there has been a clash in priorities among the member states on what it should focus its negotiating work on. The developed countries ... wanted to bring more non-trade issues into the WTO's remit. ... In contrast, many of the developing countries were by and large dissatisfied [with agreements made from 1996 to 2017]." This clash between the positions advocated by developed countries versus those of developing countries "became a recurring theme in many of the battles in the WTO, which was also evident in the Ministerials." Further, (still quoting from the Preface): "The processes during most of [the Ministerial Meetings] have been non-participatory, un-transparent and controversial, with only a few countries and the secretariat involved in the negotiations. Some meetings end in a collapse, while others succeed but with many of the countries being disgruntled."

There would be little point in summarizing here the contents of each of the chapters, because, as already noted, each chapter covers a particular Ministerial Conference, and documents how either the Conference ends with no significant agreements, or how a newly-elected Director-General used improper procedures to get developing countries to agree to positions put forth by developed countries, even though, going into the conference, developing countries had strenuously objected to the positions put forth by developed countries.

In light of what appears to be the WTO's solid history of imposing the will of a few developed countries on the rest of the world, it is particularly worrisome for those who follow issues related to the [governance](#) of information and communication technologies (including the Internet) that developed countries ([at the instigation of Big Tech](#)) are trying to use the WTO to obtain agreements in areas that are [not trade issues](#) (such as [combating spam](#)), where the content of the agreements would [enshrine the status quo of exploitation of data by dominant Internet companies](#) and lead to [exacerbation of economic and social inequality](#). The negative economic implications for developing countries of some of the proposals put forth in WTO have even been criticized in [research papers](#) of the [UN Conference for Trade and Development](#) (UNCTAD), whose excellent Digital Economy Reports (e.g. the [2021 Report](#) and the [2019 Report](#)) well document the issues related to the current concentration of data flows on the Internet. Reputable authors have explained why it is [necessary to combat dominant monopolies](#), and [how to do it](#), as [have](#) civil society organizations.

In summary, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in trade issues, how they have been expanded to impose developed-country positions with respect to agriculture, fisheries, intellectual property and other issues not directly related to trade; and how trade issues are being used to attempt to enshrine the [current domination of the Internet](#) by a handful of companies, which domination has had negative consequences both [socially](#) and [economically](#).