En Route to Yaounde: The WTO's Moment of Truth - Ministers Gather in Cameroon as the Multilateral Trading System Faces its Defining Test

By:

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As 166 trade ministers converge on Yaounde for the World Trade Organization's Fourteenth Ministerial Conference (MC14), they confront a defining choice: deliver substantive reform or preside over the multilateral trading system's gradual irrelevance. Africa's decision to host this conference at such a critical juncture carries profound symbolic and substantive weight—particularly for the continent's 1.4 billion people and the world's poorest economies whose prosperity depends on rules-based, rather than power-based, international trade.

The Crisis Is Real

The fundamental challenge is brutally simple: the WTO was designed for a world that no longer exists. As the European Union observes in their recent communication to the General Council (WT/GC/W/986), "the global trade landscape and the conditions under which the WTO and the multilateral trading system were founded in 1995 have changed fundamentally during the past 30 years." Digital trade, accounting for less than 1% of commerce in 1995, now represents 25% of global trade—USD 26 trillion annually. Yet no permanent multilateral rules govern this space. A modern semiconductor chip's production involves 25 countries, crosses 70 borders, and travels 25,000 miles, supply chain complexity unimaginable three decades ago (UK communication, WT/GC/W/993).

Meanwhile, structural imbalances have deepened alarmingly. Accordingly, in recent years some WTO members have consistently raised concern about trade deficits and the diminishing relevance of the notion of comparative advantage which for decades have been defining feature of free trade under the world trading system (US Communication to the WTO General Council of 25 December 2025). OECD estimates global steel overcapacity at 602 million metric tons, driven by capacity expansion dramatically outpacing demand. One country's manufacturing production now exceeds the nine next-largest combined—a concentration creating dangerous geopolitical dependencies.

The dispute settlement crisis compounds these challenges. Since the Appellate Body became non-functional in 2019, the system's enforcement mechanism has been paralyzed. As the [African Union's Maputo Declaration] (February 2026) emphasizes, "a system without effective enforcement is a system in name only"—particularly devastating for developing countries with limited leverage against unilateral trade measures.

Perhaps most fundamentally, decision-making has ossified. The WTO has delivered precisely two new multilateral agreements in three decades—fisheries subsidies and trade facilitation. Members increasingly equate consensus with unanimity, allowing single delegations to block progress indefinitely. As the UK observes (WT/GC/W/993): "consensus is being conflated with unanimity and is being abused to block progress."

What's at Stake for Africa and Developing Countries

For Africa, MC14's success or failure carries profound implications. The African Continental Free Trade Area represents the world's largest free trade area by number of countries, with combined GDP exceeding USD 3.5 trillion. Yet Africa's integration into the multilateral system has been woefully asymmetric.

Consider agriculture, where over 60% of Africans depend on farming for livelihoods. Whilst global agricultural trade exceeded USD 2 trillion last year, almost a fifth of Africa's population faced hunger. The Maputo Declaration notes with justified frustration: "apart from the 2015 Nairobi Decision on Export Subsidies, no substantive outcome has been reached in agriculture negotiations since they commenced 26 years ago."

According to the OECD(Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025 (EN)), 54 countries provided USD 842 billion in support to individual producers during the 2022-2024 period. This support systematically disadvantages African producers. The Cotton-4 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali) have waited since 2005 for WTO delivery on cotton commitments. This is not merely about market access; it concerns fundamental fairness in a system constraining developing countries' agricultural support whilst permitting developed countries subsidization at levels African states could never afford.

Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT), theoretically the mechanism for correcting asymmetries, has become "ritualistic rather than substantive, symbolic rather than effective" (Maputo Declaration). Over 75% of WTO Members access S&DT, including some of the world's largest economies—a dilution undermining its developmental purpose.

Without MC14 progress, the consequences for Africa and developing countries could be profound agricultural marginalization deepens, perpetuating food insecurity; digital exclusion accelerates, with Africa becoming permanent consumer rather than creator in the digital economy; investment flows diminish as countries lose tools for attracting quality FDI; and voice erodes as the WTO's irrelevance shifts negotiations to bilateral forums where developing countries lack leverage.

For Least Developed Countries, the perverse reality is stark: graduation from LDC status often means cliff-edge support withdrawal, punishing development achievement rather than celebrating it.

Where Common Ground Exists: Pathways to Consensus

Despite profound disagreements, MC14 presents genuine opportunities for meaningful progress where common ground can be identified.

Fisheries Subsidies: The Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies entered into force on 15 September 2025—the first new multilateral agreement in nearly two decades, demonstrating consensus remains possible. Phase II, addressing subsidies contributing to overcapacity and overfishing, is technically advanced. For Small Island Developing States and coastal communities, sustainable ocean management is economic imperative and survival necessity. Common ground exists because all Members recognize ocean sustainability's importance, technical work is advanced, and the development dimension is embedded through the established WTO Fisheries Fund. Despite a few concerns raised by some members, Ministers should mandate Phase II completion by MC15 with clear timelines.

Agriculture: Three areas offer realistic progress pathways. First, *public stockholding for food security*—developing countries have sought a permanent solution since 2013. The temporary "peace clause" remains inadequate. Ministers should mandate a permanent solution by MC15. Second, the *Special Safeguard Mechanism* would enable developing countries to protect local markets during import surges—a basic policy tool developed countries already possess. Third, *cotton*—the Cotton-4's patience has been heroic. Ministers should establish concrete work programmes with binding timelines on domestic support disciplines and market access. To the extent that progress is made on the other outstanding issues, common ground exists because food security is universally recognized as legitimate, technical parameters are understood, and African, LDC, and developing country priorities align with broader membership support.

Investment Facilitation for Development: Over 128 Members have signed up to this agreement, which is in itself, a significant achievement for an agreement helping developing countries attract quality investment and integrate into global value chains. Incorporating it into the WTO framework (Annex 4) requires consensus. Ministers should mandate incorporation by year-end. Common ground exists because the agreement is development-focused,

does not impose obligations on non-participants, commands substantial support, and provides a successful plurilateral model.

E-Commerce and Digital Trade: The Joint Statement Initiative on E-Commerce represents years of negotiation by a critical mass accounting for overwhelming majority of global e-commerce trade. Yet significant concerns remain about data sovereignty and regulatory autonomy. Ministers should find a way forward on the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions. Such solution should contain a built-in review mechanism, that establishes clear pathways for incorporating the e-commerce agreement with explicit development safeguards and create a Digital Trade Committee addressing emerging issues. Common ground exists because all Members recognize digital trade's importance, revenue concerns can be addressed through alternative mechanisms, and excluding digital trade from WTO purview guarantees harmful rule-fragmentation.

WTO Reform: Although the Reform Facilitator's breakout sessions (March 2026) have surfaced disagreements there are also areas where convergence can be found. On decision-making, no Member proposes eliminating consensus, yet all acknowledge paralysis. Ministers should mandate working groups on decision-making procedures, examining practices in other multilateral institutions and proposing WTO-suitable adaptations. On development, the EU's proposed (WT/GC/W/986) factual analysis on assessing S&DT effectiveness and exploring objective differentiation criteria could bridge ideological divides with evidence. On level playing field, starting with transparency improvements offers concrete first steps building trust for harder conversations. Ministers should establish structured work programs with dedicated facilitators and recommendations for MC15.

Dispute Settlement: As the Maputo Declaration states: "a fully functional, two-tier, binding dispute settlement system is indispensable to the WTO's credibility." The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) demonstrates creative solutions emerge when political will exists. Ministers should mandate intensive negotiations restoring full two-tier functionality by MC15, addressing legitimate concerns about scope and process whilst ensuring accessibility for all Members. Common ground exists because the MPIA shows solutions are possible, all Members recognize enforcement's importance, and

specific concerns can be addressed through rule clarification rather than systemic dismantlement.

What Ministers Must Do in Yaounde

Success requires political courage, creative compromise, and recognition that perfect cannot be the enemy of necessary. Ministers should deliver tangible outcomes on achievable issues: complete fisheries Phase II mandate; agree permanent public stockholding solution; incorporate investment facilitation; find common grounds on e-commerce moratorium with development safeguards.

They must establish clear work programs with accountability on agriculture (SSM, cotton, domestic support), level playing field (transparency, disciplines, remedies), and decision-making reform with concrete milestones. They must restore dispute settlement with commitment to full functionality by MC15. They must recommit to development through evidence-based S&DT review, LDC graduation transition mechanisms, and adequately funded Aid for Trade.

The Yaounde Ministerial Declaration cannot be another lowest-common-denominator communiqué. As Cameroon's vision articulates, it must be "tangible, credible evidence that multilateralism can still deliver." Not perfection. Not agreement on all things. But meaningful progress on matters affecting real people living real lives.

Conclusion

The world watches Yaounde not to see whether Ministers agree on everything, unrealistic and unnecessary. The world watches to see whether the multilateral trading system retains relevance, whether rules can still constrain power, whether the vulnerable have voice, and whether collective action remains possible.

For Africa, for LDCs, for developing countries, and ultimately for all Members benefiting from predictable, rules-based trade, the stakes could not be higher. The choice is stark: reform or irrelevance, multilateralism or fragmentation, rules or power.

The substance must begin in Yaounde.

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