



Cameroon Economic Policy Institute

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FOUNDATION

WTO Inter-Ministerial Meeting: *Setting the Agenda*

Key Highlights

- *The WTO Appellate Body must be filled and the agriculture sector should be given greater consideration due to its impact on GDP and the informal sector.*
- *Taxes on Digital Trade should be given careful consideration as rising debt levels and tariff reductions can constrain African budgets.*
- *Subsidies must be reduced significantly while the Special and Differential Status should stay for the medium term.*

WTO Ministerial Conference 14 (MC14)

26 – 29 March 2026 · Yaoundé, Cameroon

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Yaoundé, Cameroon | March 2026

Introduction

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is convening global trade ministers in Yaoundé between 26 and 29 March 2026 to discuss and debate global trade policy, dynamics, and agreements. The meeting provides a unique chance for trade ministers, experts, traders, and policymakers to find common solutions to shared challenges.

At present, the global trade landscape feels less like a synchronized orchestra and more like a collection of soloists playing different tunes of tariffs, geopolitical uncertainty, industrial policies, and economic security.

This meeting is consequential: the decisions made and alliances forged will determine whether the multilateral trading system remains a pillar of global cooperation. From the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to the Economic Partnership Agreement, there are many issues to discuss — but prioritization is essential.

10% private sector participation in African municipal finance vs. 75% globally (REAVCO, 2026)

17 – 20% of Africa's GDP contributed by the agriculture sector

1.4 Billion Africans in the single market created by the AfCFTA

This policy brief sets out an agenda for the Africa delegations and all trade delegates attending the Yaoundé summit. It provides a brief overview of important issues that affect Africa and other developing countries, while acknowledging the interest of advanced economies.

1. WTO Reform: Restoring the Referee

It is well established that the WTO needs reform, especially its Dispute Settlement System, which is paralyzed because the Appellate Body lacks sufficient judges. The United States continues to block nominations, to the detriment of smaller member countries. A single large donor should not be permitted to hold the entire system back.

The U.S. is forcing the world to play a football match where a referee can blow a whistle, but there is no VAR or final authority to confirm a red card. Players eventually stop following the rules. For Cameroon and Africa, a functional referee is essential to protect smaller economies from larger trading powers.

CEPI is advocating for:

- ***Negotiating function:*** Speeding up the rule-making process to reflect current trade realities.
- ***Monitoring:*** Greater transparency requirements for members regarding their trade policies including subsidies, industrial policies and state-owned enterprises.
- ***Dispute Settlement:*** Restoring a two-tier system by 2026 to guarantee fair hearings regardless of GDP. Supporting nominations to the WTO appellate body.

2. Agriculture and Food Security: The Bread-and-Butter Issues

In Africa, agriculture is a vital source of employment, income, and food security. The sector contributes between 17–20% of Africa's GDP and serves as a lifeline for millions of vulnerable families. The time has come to address the massive subsidies that wealthier countries provide to their farmers, making it impossible for a tomato farmer in Fouban to compete with subsidized imports.

- ***Limiting trade-distorting subsidies*** will prevent imports from displacing local workers and crushing domestic production.
- ***Public Stockholding (PSH)*** must not be contentious: Cameroon and its neighbors must be permitted to purchase and store food from local farmers without facing WTO sanctions. The decision by both the UK and U.S. to reduce foreign development assistance makes food reserves more critical than ever.

3. Digital Trade: To Tax or Not to Tax?

The AfCFTA digital trade protocol has been ratified by countries including Nigeria, legitimizing electronic signatures, regulatory sandboxes, and licensing cooperation. The e-commerce moratorium remains exploitative for developing countries that consume far more digital goods than they produce, and may stifle the continent's growing base of innovators and content creators.

CEPI calls on delegates to use MC14 as the forum to chart a clear digital trade path — one that supports participation by developing countries and ensures the necessary infrastructure investments are made.

4. Greening the Cargo While Making the Coins

Trade policy and environmental responsibility are not mutually exclusive. Fossil fuel subsidies must be significantly reduced to incentivize a shift toward cleaner and more productive alternatives. Cameroon is committed to enforcing its plastics ban in 2026, and coordinated international rules are needed to reduce the flow of single-use plastics that clog African waterways and harm communities.

5. Fisheries Subsidies: Protecting Our Blue Economy

Harmful subsidies are depleting and polluting our oceans. CEPI's priority is the finalization of **Phase 2** of the Fisheries Agreement. When large foreign trawlers are subsidized to fish in West African waters, artisanal fishermen in Kribi and Limbe are left with nothing. We must stop the financing that enables illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and protect fish stocks so that the **Blue Economy** can sustain future generations.

6. Development and Inclusivity: Special & Differential Treatment

The WTO's "Special and Differential Treatment" (S&DT) framework is a vital tool allowing developing countries adequate time to implement new rules. However, when a country like Angola or Togo graduates from the Least-Developed Country (LDC) category, the immediate removal of all S&DT benefits is counterproductive. MC14 must deliver a smooth, phased transition mechanism for graduating countries.

7. Cutting the Red Tape Intelligently

Africa's investment incentive landscape is at times counterproductive. The **Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD)** agreement provides a much-needed guidepost for members — offering a framework that promotes transparency, streamlines approvals, and supports countries that accede to it. CEPI encourages Cameroon and its regional partners to actively engage with the IFD process at MC14 and continue to align local norms with global standards.

The AfCFTA as a Continental Engine for Growth

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) creates a single market of 1.4 billion people. Despite its promise, implementation has been slow and substantive trade under the framework has yet to materialize at scale. The WTO and AfCFTA frameworks are complementary — aligning their standards will ensure African products are export-ready for global markets.

"If we align the AfCFTA standards to WTO rules, African products will be more export-ready for the rest of the world."

Dr. Egbe-Njie Fride, Research Fellow, CEPI

Conclusion

Business as usual is not an option. For the WTO to function as a fair and effective system, it must acknowledge development gaps, curtail environment-destroying subsidies, and resist the use of trade policy to prop up domestic markets at the expense of the Global South. A business owner in Yaoundé deserves the same opportunity to reach a customer in New York as anyone else. MC14 in Yaoundé is a rare opportunity — one that must support a re-think of global rules while reinforcing the multilateral trading system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Henri is a consultant for the *Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)* and previously worked as a consultant for the *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation* as well as the *North American Treaty Alliance (NATO)* at the height of the Russia-Ukraine War. One of the top verifiable trade and climate experts in Cameroon, he previously worked at the *Nkafu Policy Institute* and is a fierce advocate for liberty.

About CEPI

The Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI) is an independent economic policy institute dedicated to research, advocacy, and dialogue on trade, finance, and development in Cameroon and across Africa. CEPI engages policymakers, the private sector, and civil society to promote evidence-based policy reform and economic freedom through strategic engagement.