



Cameroon Economic Policy Institute

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MC14: Progress Stalls but 66 Countries *Press on with E-Commerce Moratorium*

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Key Highlights

- *Countries adopted a separate plurilateral initiative to maintain zero customs duty on e-commerce*
- *WTO Agreement on **Fisheries Subsidies** — banning financial support for illegal fishing*
- *Major decisions adopted or progressed at MC14 across trade, digital, and development agendas*

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Introduction

The World Trade Organization (WTO) inter-ministerial conference ran from 26 to 29 March, and delegates and ministers descended from all over the world. There was a lot to discuss and debate, and while Yaoundé did not cause any major new decisions, there is a recognition that more must be done to include and encourage developing countries like Cameroon to join the multilateral trading system.

MC14 sent a strong signal to the world that developing countries must engage and participate in the global trading system in a manner that facilitates economic development while creating the right conditions for them to slowly develop while integrating global value chains. This brief provides a snapshot of the issues discussed and the level of negotiations, agreements, and/or disagreements.

1. WTO Reform? What Does it Mean?

It is a well-known adage that the WTO needs to be reformed, especially the Dispute Settlement System, which is paralyzed due to the Appellate Body's lack of sufficient judges. Far from being focused on the appellate body alone, the discussion focused on decision making, past mandates and development as well as level playing issues.

On another note, WTO reform is really about how decisions should be made and how "consensus-driven" decision making can be modified for different types of decisions.

Meanwhile, development talks centred around the Special and Differential treatment to account for the differing realities of various countries who are advocating for a level playing field.

A formal adoption of the reform agenda will send a strong signal to developing countries as it ultimately places other reform pressures on their economies. Issues like stockpiling rules and customs duties on digital trade will have to be carefully weaved into the agreement to ensure maximum positive impact.

Dr. Egbe-Njie Fride, Research Fellow

2. Agriculture and Food Security: No Show in Discussions!

The WTO rules on public stockholding (PSH) are governed by the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which allows government stockpile and distribute food for food security purposes. However, Annex 2 states that any purchase as part of a food security programme must be bought at market prices, or else developing countries face legal challenges. A Peace Clause adopted as an interim solution at the 2013 Bali ministerial conference prevents legal challenges against developing countries. However, negotiations for a permanent solution have remained deadlocked since MC12 and MC13. CEPI suggests:

- *Exempting food bought at administered prices from subsidy calculations*
- *Updating the 1986–1988 reference price (seen as outdated due to inflation)*
- *Widening the product coverage to include more developing-country staples*

At MC14, there was little talk about the issue of public stockholding. It remains challenging for developing countries to abide by international standards that do not reflect their economic realities and food security needs.

3. Digital Trade: 66 Countries Choose Free Trade!

The e-commerce moratorium is an agreement designed to prevent governments from imposing restrictions on electronic transmission that travel across borders. Electronic transmissions cover things like downloadable books and could extend to streaming services. Developing countries rejected U.S. proposals to make the moratorium permanent, and a group of 66 countries chose to proceed with the moratorium, as a decision could not be reached to extend it for 4–6 years.

Another important issue was the moratorium on non-violation complaints (NVCs) under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement. This is important because some countries abide by WTO rules while adversely impacting or nullifying positive trade benefits for other members. Developing countries had hoped that linking the NVC clause to the e-commerce moratorium would create policy room for progress, but both were not adopted in the end.

"However, 66 countries agreed to a plurilateral initiative to maintain zero customs duty on e-commerce trade, signaling a shift to more flexible and smaller agreements within the WTO. The moratorium has been in place since 1998 and has been renewed every two years, but developing countries will continue to argue that they need policy space as reducing tariffs imposes costs on government revenues and limits fiscal space."

Dr. Chefor Daisy, Research Fellow

4. Fisheries Subsidies: In the Agenda for MC15

Harmful subsidies are emptying and polluting our oceans. Negotiations on fisheries subsidies — essential to regulate practices contributing to overfishing — are deferred to the next Ministerial Conference. WTO members celebrated the 2022 Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, which bans financial support to illegal fishing or fishing of already depleted stocks without concurrent efforts to restore stocks, as well as unregulated fishing in the high seas. WTO members are committed to completing unfinished parts of the deal, with additional restrictions on various forms of subsidies that support overcapacity and overfishing. Countries like Indonesia outlined the interactions with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Why This Matters for Developing Countries:

Overfishing is a scourge for developing countries with verifiable implications for employment, incomes, and the environment. They usually lack the capacity to enforce overfishing safeguards, making the agreement indispensable in protecting their resources over the long run.

5. Developing Countries Get Some Leeway?

The WTO uses the term "*Special and Differential Treatment*" (*S&DT*), a vital tool that allows developing countries enough time to implement rules. However, should countries lose all their benefits when they graduate? Some progress is in sight. There was broad acknowledgement of the need to ensure that developing countries effectively integrate global value chains to effectively benefit from global trade.

Ministers adopted two MC14 decisions that were endorsed earlier by members in Geneva: on improving the integration of small economies into the multilateral trading system; and on enhancing the precise, effective, and operational implementation of special and differential treatment provisions in the Agreements on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT).

6. Cutting the Red Tape Intelligently

Africa tends to have too many incentives that border on predation. The Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) agreement got some mention, but there were not many serious conversations about incentives. Africa has some of the most generous incentives for investments, which include 10-year tax breaks and various tax rebates for equipment that range from drilling equipment to laptops.

CEPI Observation:

If a mining company trains a Botswana national, they are repaid up to 200% of the amount they spent. Africa's investment incentive landscape is at times counterproductive — incentives must be smarter, more targeted, and tied to measurable development outcomes.

Conclusion

There was some progress, but not a lot. Trade Ministers adopted two previous decisions endorsed earlier in Geneva. This includes integrating small economies into the multilateral trading system and improving the precise, effective, and operational implementation of the special and differential treatment provisions on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT).

This is a valuable first step to ensure that developing countries have the time and space to adapt and integrate global value chains. Business as usual is not an option — for the WTO to function as a fair and effective system, it must evolve to reflect the realities of the 21st century global economy.

MAJOR DECISIONS AT MC14: KEY ISSUES

Decision	Summary	Implications for Development
Small Economies Integration	Ministers adopted a formal decision to improve the integration of Small Island and vulnerable economies into the multilateral trading system.	Enhances participation for structurally disadvantaged nations through proportionate flexibility in implementing trade rules and improved market access.
SPS Agreement Implementation	Adopted measures to enhance the precise, effective, and operational implementation of Special and Differential Treatment regarding Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures.	Reduces technical hurdles for developing nations, allowing better compliance and increased export opportunities for agricultural and food products.
TBT Agreement Implementation	Adopted similar measures for Technical Barriers to Trade, focusing on operationalizing S&DT for developing members to ensure better market participation.	Minimizes the burden of technical regulations and standards, helping smaller exporters navigate complex global quality requirements.
LDC Support Package	Progressed a dedicated package of measures aimed at assisting Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to be finalized in Geneva.	Provides critical graduation support and technical assistance to ensure LDCs do not lose trade benefits immediately upon reaching higher income status.
Fisheries Subsidies (Phase 2)	Ministers agreed to continue negotiations with a mandate to deliver comprehensive disciplines on harmful subsidies by MC15.	Aimed at protecting global fish stocks, which are vital for the food security and maritime economies of coastal developing nations.
E-Commerce Moratorium	No multilateral consensus was reached to extend the customs duties moratorium; 66 members adopted a separate interim declaration instead.	The lapse of the multilateral moratorium theoretically allows developing nations to tax electronic transmissions, potentially recouping lost customs revenue.
TRIPS Moratorium	Consensus was not reached on the TRIPS non-violation and situation	Developing nations may face increased litigation risks regarding IP, though it also

	complaints moratorium, creating legal uncertainty for intellectual property disputes.	opens doors for new policy space in tech and health sectors.
WTO Institutional Reform	Reaffirmed commitment to a Work Plan for reform, including restoring the dispute settlement system and the Appellate Body.	A functional Appellate Body is essential for developing nations to challenge trade violations by powerful economies without fear of unilateral retaliation.

About CEPI

The Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI) is a think tank lodged at the Henri Kouam Foundation improving economic development through fact-based research, policy advocacy, and events to boost entrepreneurship and free-market ideas. CEPI has successfully led two verifiable policy reforms.

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