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E-Commerce, Fisheries, World Trade Organization Reforms: Unpacking the Outcomes of the WTO 14th Ministerial Conference

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The 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) was held between the 26 and the 30 of March 2026 in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The topmost decision-making body of the WTO met, as scheduled on a bi-annual basis, and this time brought together nearly 2,000 trade officials and more than 90 ministers responsible for trade from WTO members, to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the multilateral trading system and to take action on the future work of the WTO. The Conference was chaired by Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana, Cameroon's Minister of Trade.

MC14's [agenda](#) was quite packed, and included topics such as the extension of the E-Commerce moratorium¹, agricultural subsidies and the WTO reforms. Delegates worked around the clock to advance negotiations on these key portfolios, but the effort to assemble a ministerial declaration outlining a direction for future WTO reform, reopening negotiations on agriculture, and modernising the organisation's rules to reflect digital trade did not bear fruit. While consensus² ultimately proved elusive, the intensity of the discussions underscored the importance that members continue to attach to these issues.

Outcomes of MC14

MC14 concluded without an overall ministerial declaration or a chair's summary reflecting conference-wide agreement, and several key objectives remained unresolved. Most notably, members failed to agree on extending the moratorium on duties on e-commerce, a long-standing pillar of the global digital economy. As a result, the moratorium expired on 31 March and was not renewed, fracturing the WTO-wide ban on such duties and introducing new uncertainty into digital trade, including the potential for national tariffs on digital goods such as movies or downloads. While extending the E-Commerce moratorium was heavily discussed during the conference, some members' positions were reaffirmed, and the clock struck before parties reached a conclusion. H.E. Mbarga Atangana, the MC14 Chair, admitted it: "[We ran out of time](#)", with regard to the E-Commerce moratorium and several other discussions. All texts negotiated are still working drafts, awaiting their approval by consensus. However, he also informed delegates that negotiations on the topic will resume in Geneva during the upcoming WTO General Council, currently scheduled to take place from 6-7 May 2026. It is yet to be seen if this would extend the existing moratorium or start afresh and negotiate a new text.

¹ The WTO E-Commerce moratorium is a long-standing agreement not to impose customs duties or tariffs on electronic transmissions such as digital downloads and streamed content. It has been renewed repeatedly since 1998.

² The WTO operates on a consensus-based decision-making system, where decisions are adopted only if no member present at a

meeting formally objects. This method ensures member-driven, fair decision-making but can lead to slow negotiations or deadlocks, as any single member can veto proposals.

However, Member states managed to get some small but significant decisions over the line. After four days of debates, trade ministers agreed to continue negotiations on fisheries subsidies, which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing more broadly. They aim to formulate recommendations for the 15th Ministerial Conference to achieve the comprehensive disciplines on fisheries subsidies set out in Article 12 of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, which entered into force on the 15 of September 2025. This is a positive development, as fisheries subsidies provided by national governments have led to a crisis of overfishing, with around 35,5% of global fish stocks already fully overfished (and with the proportion of overfished stocks continuing to increase of 1% per year – [FAO, 2025](#)). Advancing negotiations on this issue is a big step forward for development, the environment, and trade. The decision to reinforce members' collective commitment to complete the missing part of the deal sends a signal to the world that fisheries remain an important issue for the WTO and beyond, helping prevent this process from losing momentum. In addition, it indicates that multilateralism is still alive within the WTO, despite attempts by some parties to undermine or block negotiations on key agreements.

They also adopted two MC14 decisions previously endorsed by members in Geneva, focusing on strengthening the integration of small economies into the multilateral trading system and on improving the clarity, effectiveness, and operational application of special and differential treatment provisions under the Agreements on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT).

Zoom on the E-Commerce Agreement

Despite the setback on the expiry of the E-Commerce moratorium, the digital trade is better off than before the start of MC 14: Sixty-six members (67 with the European Union, representing 27 countries but counting and acting as one) covering 70 % of world trade³, [announced a plurilateral E-Commerce agreement](#) (officially named WTO Agreement on Electronic Commerce). Participating economies range from very largest WTO members, such as the European Union and China, to very small economies, such as the Gambia. The new agreement partially fills the void left by the expired moratorium for

its participants, who commit to a permanent ban on such customs duties — but it bears emphasis that this is not a restoration of the universal moratorium: countries outside the 66 signatories remain free to impose duties on electronic transmissions, and the multilateral floor has not been rebuilt. What the agreement does accomplish is significant nonetheless: it establishes binding disciplines aimed at improving transparency and predictability in cross-border digital trade, reducing regulatory fragmentation, and providing flexibilities for developing and least-developed country members. However, a few operational questions remain, as they are left out of the declaration. For instance, how will meetings, administrative work and dispute settlement be funded? Only time will tell.

In the meantime, the new E-Commerce agreement will enter into force 30 days after 45 members have deposited their instruments of acceptance — a threshold that now sets the clock running in capitals around the world. The signatories have made clear they will continue pursuing that path, and the door remains explicitly open for additional WTO members to join.

The manner in which this agreement came to life carries a message as important as its content. Credit lies squarely with the three co-conveners — Australia, Japan, and Singapore — whose sustained diplomatic investment held the initiative together through two failed attempts⁴ to formally anchor the agreement in the WTO rulebook. Their success is a demonstration that middle powers, acting in coalition, retain genuine agency in shaping the architecture of international trade relations. In addition, this plurilateral agreement may be viewed as a significant development within the WTO framework. It demonstrates that progress on specific issues need not be indefinitely constrained by the absence of consensus, allowing like-minded members to move forward through plurilateral initiatives. While such an approach may temporarily sideline members who choose not to participate, it also raises legitimate concerns that increased reliance on plurilateral agreements could, over time, contribute to greater fragmentation of the global trading system. The right balance will need to be found. In the case of the E-Commerce agreement, with the ICT sector

³ More on the signatories on the WTO plurilateral agreement on E-Commerce can be found in our [Map of the Month – April 2026](#)

⁴ MC13 in Abu Dhabi, February 2024 and the WTO General Council Meeting in March 2026

accounting for more than 6% of global GDP in 2022⁵ and growing, the absence of any binding global digital trade rules has become an increasingly costly gap; the agreement addresses this for the countries that matter most to digital commerce flows.

Next Steps

Even though criticisms were heard about the lack of major advancements in Yaoundé, MC14 did not close the book — it opened the next chapter, and the work to be done back in Geneva is substantial. WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was unambiguous as delegations departed: the draft texts developed over the four days of ministerial discussions — collectively the "emerging Yaoundé package" — should not be put away on a shelf. The package covers four distinct but interconnected dossiers: the draft Yaoundé Ministerial Declaration on WTO Reform and Work Plan; the draft Ministerial Decision on Electronic Commerce; the draft Ministerial Decision on the Moratorium on TRIPS Non-Violation and Situation Complaints; and the least developed country (LDC) package. "We shouldn't leave it on the table," the Director-General said plainly. She called on members to advance and hopefully finalise these texts at the next WTO General Council meeting — a tight but achievable window if political will holds.

The ball will now be in the hands of Ambassador Clare Kelly from New Zealand, as the new Chair of the General Council. As delegates have all returned either to Geneva or to their respective capitals, informal consultations are currently underway to assess members' positions on the "Yaoundé Package". The Chair can then decide to either present the full set of draft texts to the General Council or to focus first on the most pressing issues, identified as the E-Commerce Moratorium and the WTO reforms. While the direction for the WTO reforms has been agreed during MC14, its formal adoption was not reached, as it

was presented by some members as conditional to the E-commerce memorandum, making it impossible to pass at the time. While the General Council might be postponed for a few days, to allow enough time for discussions beforehand, failing to conclude these discussions in the next couple of weeks and a deferral of decisions to successive General Council agendas risks creating a Doha-like dynamic. In this scenario, the political cost of deciding is higher than the short-term cost of postponing, making consensus progressively harder to build, and the window of opportunity to advance these negotiations could ultimately end up closing due to inertia.

The E-Commerce moratorium alone carries enormous practical consequences; together with WTO reform commitments and the LDC package⁶, a Yaoundé package would represent one of the more substantive inter-sessional achievements in recent WTO history. Yet realism must accompany ambition. The broader WTO system remains under strain, and the path to genuine institutional reform is long. It should not be surprising, as observers have noted, that 166 trade sovereigns cannot readily find agreement on issues where interests diverge sharply — but it is important that they keep trying. What MC14 ultimately affirms, across E-Commerce and beyond, is that the multilateral trading system is not inert: it is contested, imperfect, and slow — but it moves. The outcomes are hard-won and coalition-built, but it is what keeps the order alive.

The lesson from Yaoundé is one that defenders of the rules-based international order would do well to carry forward: there is ultimately no substitute for multilateral rules of law and cooperation, and the WTO, for all its limitations, remains the only arena where 166 sovereigns sit together to try to build them.

⁵ For more details, see the World Bank. 2024. [Digital Progress and Trends Report](#) 2023. Washington, DC: World Bank.

⁶ The LDC package aims to support LDCs in integrating into the multilateral trading system, strengthening trade-related capacities, and advancing LDC development objectives. The set of measures discussed in Yaoundé aims to give LDC concrete tools to use trade for development. No standalone measures were adopted during MC14; instead, ministers endorsed the continuation of existing mechanisms and postponed negotiations on the future of the package.

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