

## MC14 and the negotiations on agriculture: A critical juncture for development

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The 14th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization, which was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon on 26–29 March 2026, was a critical moment in the history of the WTO, coming in the wake of an ‘outbreak’ of Trump tariffs and an extreme positioning of US trade policy since April 2025. Agriculture, being a critical part of the WTO agreements and negotiations, had much at stake for developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) but MC14 failed to deliver anything of use on this front. Moreover, the limited negotiations on agriculture before and during MC14 witnessed a push by the most economically advanced WTO member state towards obliterating past development-oriented mandates and relaunching negotiations anew. Another move towards launching discussions on a new set of emerging issues, without resolving outstanding ones, also raised serious questions about the future direction of WTO rule-making on agricultural trade.

### **The WTO and agriculture**

Global trade and harmonised trade rules under the WTO, under the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) in particular, had been advocated as tools/solutions to improve availability of and access to food, increase global production and stabilise global markets. Moreover, these rules were to cater to agricultural development across developing countries and LDCs by ensuring fair access to global markets, facilitated by equitable subsidy disciplines on the developed countries who were large users of both domestic and export subsidies, as well as by some preferential policies for developing countries under special and differential treatment (S&DT) provisions.

But as it turned out, the AoA rules have allowed special flexibilities for *developed* countries through extra entitlements of domestic subsidies and rampant misuse of the Green Box subsidies. At the same time, the rules have imposed strict limits on subsidies of developing countries, thus narrowing their policy flexibility to address domestic agricultural concerns including by boosting domestic production to meet food security and livelihood needs. The AoA has also bound – i.e., imposed upper limits on – most agricultural import

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tariffs, which are the main tool developing countries use to protect their farmers from unfair competition. It is thus not a surprise that the 31-year record of the WTO has failed to deliver much for the Global South.

Instead, in the agriculture negotiations, developing countries and LDCs have had to continuously fight on key issues and for policy space vital for ensuring agricultural production and development, livelihoods and long-term food security in their countries. The negotiations may have sometimes secured mandates to reach particular outcomes, but most of these mandates have remained unrealised up to and at MC14.

### **The road to MC14 and key issues on the table<sup>1</sup>**

One of the most important issues under negotiation is a **permanent solution on public stockholding (PSH)** which would allow developing countries and LDCs the policy space to provide price support subsidies to their farmers, especially small and marginal farmers, when purchasing food stocks for public food stockholding (and distribution) programmes. Such programmes are largely used by developing countries and LDCs for distribution of food to poor consumers, as well as for supporting farmers' livelihoods and enabling them to continue production through price support policies. Both these objectives of PSH programmes are essential for ensuring long-term domestic food security in such countries.

While an interim solution on PSH was secured in 2013 at the WTO's Bali Ministerial Conference, a permanent solution – which, under a mandate from Bali, was to have been agreed by 2017 – has been repeatedly blocked. The permanent solution is needed to deliver a more user-friendly instrument free from the severe conditionalities imposed in the interim solution and allow more developing countries and LDCs to be able to use it. A 2022 submission<sup>2</sup> by the G-33, the African Group and the ACP Group comprising 80 countries has not even been discussed. Ahead of MC14, the permanent solution was raised in submissions by several countries and country groupings including the African Group,<sup>3</sup> the LDC Group,<sup>4</sup> the G-33<sup>5</sup> and Indonesia<sup>6</sup> that called for an outcome by MC15.

A **Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM)** that would allow developing countries and LDCs to raise import duties to protect against destructive import surges, much along the lines of what is already enjoyed by developed countries under Article 5 of the AoA, has met with the same fate as the PSH permanent solution. Such import surges have repeatedly devastated farming livelihoods by creating uncertainty and volatility in domestic agricultural markets. Developing countries including the G-33 and the African Group have submitted several papers on the SSM<sup>7</sup> but progress on this issue has repeatedly been tied to demands by developed countries and very recently by agricultural exporting countries for further market opening.<sup>8</sup> The African Group, the LDC Group, the G-33 and Indonesia all flagged this issue in their submissions (see endnotes 3–6) before MC14.

Disciplines on massive **cotton subsidies** given by developed countries, the US being the biggest user, are another issue of interest to developing countries and LDCs that has continued to languish. Among the several demands put forward that are supposed to ensure greater market access for poor cotton-producing countries, the one on domestic subsidies is the most urgent. In spite of a clear demand from the Cotton-4 African cotton-producing countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali) and Côte d'Ivoire for a decision at MC14,<sup>9</sup> the Ministerial Conference failed to even take up this issue. In fact, the US had already rebuffed such demands earlier.<sup>10</sup>

It is to be noted that all the above three issues were the subject of specific reaffirmed mandates from the Nairobi Ministerial Conference of 2015. However, since then, there has not been any outcome on these issues. In fact, there is not even any other agreed ministerial decision on agriculture, except the one adopted on the World Food Programme<sup>11</sup> during the 12th Ministerial Conference of the WTO in 2022 which had very limited scope.

Overall **domestic support** (subsidies) disciplines that would rein in inequitable elements such as the extra AMS (Aggregate Measurement of Support) subsidy entitlements (under Article 6.3 of the AoA)<sup>12</sup> enjoyed mostly by the developed countries, have been the most critical and consistent demand of developing countries and LDCs since the formation of the WTO.<sup>13</sup> India and the African Group have submitted several proposals on this issue even in recent times.<sup>14</sup> The group of agricultural exporting countries known as the Cairns Group, which includes key players such as Brazil, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand, has also been submitting proposals on this issue.<sup>15</sup> However, they suggest imposing disciplines on all trade-distorting domestic subsidies, including entitlements specifically given to developing countries and LDCs known as Development Box subsidies, which has been opposed by most developing countries and LDCs. The African Group had in fact been working with the Cairns Group to reconcile their respective positions but this process reportedly broke down a few months before MC14.<sup>16</sup>

Some developing countries have also been raising the need for greater policy tools to address **situations of food crisis**. Earlier proposals in this regard by the African Group and Pakistan were followed up in an African Group proposal ahead of MC14 (see endnote 3). But again, this issue has never found any serious takers especially among developed countries. The only solution offered by the latter is unfettered liberalisation, not taking into account structural inequalities at domestic and global levels.

In addition to the above issues, where developing countries and LDCs have been advocating positive outcomes, there are several issues largely of ‘defensive’ interest to most developing countries and LDCs. Such issues include increasing **market access** through tariff elimination, as well as the more complex issue of **removal of export restrictions** while balancing domestic food security needs in a situation of food crisis. Both these issues have been consistently pursued by the farm exporting countries.<sup>17</sup> Most developed countries have targeted export restriction measures in developing countries in spite of the fact that many of them have also pursued these measures themselves. However, demands for greater market access seem to have waned somewhat among some developed countries such as the EU, which itself has been grappling with domestic farmers’ opposition to aggressive import liberalisation through tariff cuts. The US’ recent tariff policies have, in fact, broken all rules and the MFN principle of the WTO. As in the case of the other issues above, neither of these issues made headway ahead of MC14.

In the run-up to MC14, the US administration’s confrontationist attitude through 2025 had definitely created a chill factor on all WTO negotiation tracks. 2025 also extracted a lot of energy from most WTO member states who were engaged in multiple bilateral deals. In agriculture, where developing countries and LDCs had the most to gain if mandated issues were to be resolved equitably, a strong US pushback seemed to be expected, leading to a clear lowering of ambition among them. Even other members, including developed countries and the Cairns Group, seemed to follow the same approach. Even though there were several proposals submitted between December 2025 and MC14, almost all sought to defer any major outcomes to MC15.<sup>18</sup>

#### **MC14: From actions to narratives**

With most substantive decisions expected to be postponed to MC15, the negotiations in the last few months before MC14 focused more on the framework and approaches going forward.

The final draft of the declaration on agriculture that was to be adopted by MC14<sup>19</sup> – which was circulated ahead of the conference by the Chair of the WTO agriculture talks, Ambassador Ali Sarfraz Hussain of Pakistan – reflected the battle over narratives which has in fact increasingly underpinned the agriculture negotiations over the last few Ministerial Conferences. A lot of this narrative building seems centred around some key phrases and often reflects the gap between the thinking and priorities of agricultural exporters and developed countries on the one side and a vast majority of developing countries and LDCs on the other.

Ensuring ‘precise, effective and operational’ **special and differential treatment** and integrating and strengthening S&DT in the WTO’s agricultural rule-making has long been a core and consistent demand of developing countries and LDCs and continues to be an overarching framework for them. **Food security** has also become a key agenda for them for more than a decade. In fact, both PSH and SSM are premised as critical tools to ensure food security in developing countries and LDCs. However, the concept of food security has also seen alternative interpretations from developed countries and farm exporters, with each advancing their own approach to ensuring global food security.

Another overarching framework advanced by developing countries is the need for flexible **policy space for agricultural development** including to promote production, livelihoods and incomes in addition to food security. Policy space has been their consistent demand echoed in other areas of WTO negotiations as well. This has also been clearly articulated by the net food-importing developing countries (NFIDCs) and LDCs. The concept of policy space for crisis management, in particular, has gained ground since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Developing countries have also reiterated the need to follow a **sequence approach** by resolving outstanding mandated issues first.

In contrast, as mentioned earlier, a core demand of the developed countries and the Cairns Group has been **agriculture market liberalisation** (market access) through tariff cuts, and they have argued this is the only way to achieve food security. On subsidies, the developed countries have been fighting hard to protect their own subsidies (while targeting developing-country subsidies). The Cairns Group, whose commercial interests drive a demand for complete liberalisation through both tariff and subsidy removal, has framed this as an agricultural **trade reform agenda** outlined under Article 20 of the AoA.<sup>20</sup> Pursuing this reform agenda, they argue, is critical to meet food security and sustainability needs. However, this approach has been countered by a majority of developing countries and LDCs who are unwilling to commit to complete market liberalisation or subsidy cuts as the existing AoA rules and those proposed in further negotiations have been neither equitable nor generally beneficial for them. Ahead of MC14, the apparent need for **‘a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system’** (as articulated in the AoA) was one of the key narratives, but most developing countries, especially LDCs, have referred only to a ‘fair’ agricultural trading system and dropped the reference to a ‘market-oriented’ one in their submissions.

The Chair’s draft declaration incorporated many of these ideas, including S&DT, the role of food security (though this was watered down to some extent compared with the original draft), the role of a reform process, negotiations based on Article 20 of the AoA, and a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system. However, the draft declaration failed to specifically mention the issues with long-overdue mandates raised repeatedly by developing countries, on the grounds that these would be unacceptable to many members, most notably the US. While India and the Cotton-4 countries (and Côte d’Ivoire) wanted PSH and cotton to be mentioned specifically, their demands were not met. Even though the mandates continue in principle as far as future negotiations are concerned, the value of a ministerial declaration on agriculture in providing a positive pathway for developing countries and LDCs is drastically reduced without mention of the specific issues.

But it was another narrative that ultimately decided the fate of this skeletal declaration. For the last few years, and continuing till MC14, a narrative has been developing that the agriculture negotiations have been marked by **‘limited progress’** and **‘significant divergences’**, therefore resulting in a **‘stalemate’**. This has paved the way for the argument that **‘relaunch’** of the negotiations is necessary.<sup>21</sup> This narrative has emerged even though developing countries have engaged in the negotiations in good faith, as evident from their continued submissions on all these issues, most of which have, however, not even made it to the negotiating table.

While this narrative has largely been put forward by the agricultural exporting countries, the US in fact called for a completely **‘new approach’** at MC14, one that ostensibly denies previous progress on key issues. Even when this was accommodated in the Chair’s text, the US went further and insisted on deletion of a reference in the text to **‘past ministerial decisions and declarations’**. This would have forced developing countries

and LDCs to forgo any gains on issues and concerns of critical importance for them, and for which they had already made concessions in other areas<sup>22</sup> or where developed countries are already enjoying a similar benefit.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the US apparently insisted at MC14 that the declaration should include reference only to new approaches and nothing else. This was understandably rejected by most developing countries and LDCs. Thus the US made sure that a declaration on agriculture could not go through at MC14. During the conference, India submitted a document<sup>24</sup> on ‘new approaches’ which argued that ‘any possible new approach shall be consistent with existing mandates and not dilute or replace them’. While this may be a basis for discussing new approaches going forward, it could not be discussed at MC14 given the paucity of time.

### **‘Emerging agricultural trade issues’**

In another interesting development, one that may influence future negotiations, 12 WTO members<sup>25</sup> submitted a proposal on ‘**emerging agricultural trade issues**’<sup>26</sup> prior to MC14. This proposal suggested a ministerial decision at MC14 that would launch discussions on a gamut of issues with an open-ended agenda. The main focus seemed to be on sustainability and technology. While the proposal failed to get adopted as a ministerial decision, it was resubmitted on 31 March and circulated for information at the WTO General Council meeting on 6–7 May. It proposes a dialogue process launched by the 12 proponents which is open for other members to join and is to be reported to the General Council. In other words, it seems to be the start of a new Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) paving the way for a plurilateral agreement along the agriculture track.

It is important to remember that the many papers submitted on ‘reform’ by Brazil and the Cairns Group have already spanned the concept of sustainability. Brazil had also proposed a ‘dialogue on sustainable agriculture’ (WTO document JOB/AG/261). Further, a retreat on ‘Sustainable Agriculture in the Multilateral Trading System’ was held for WTO member states on 5–6 May 2025. The retreat failed to reach any consensus on the way forward.<sup>27</sup> In particular, given the US’ lack of enthusiasm for launching any workstream on agriculture and sustainability, this track did not advance much in the official negotiations.

The issue of technology in agriculture, most notably of genetically modified crops and digital technology, has also been creeping into WTO discussions through both the agriculture as well as the e-commerce tracks. In particular, the role of digital technology in agriculture is new, complex and extremely sensitive from a regulatory perspective, having significant implications for farmers’ livelihoods and their control over production and distribution.

While sustainability and technology are undeniably important issues for the future, whether these issues can be tackled in the WTO in a credible and development-friendly manner remains a question for developing countries and LDCs. Given past experience, there are major concerns that both issues may be framed in WTO discussions and negotiations in a manner that goes against these countries’ development objectives, in particular by imposing rules and standards that create barriers and take policy control away from their hands. For example, many believe that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is instead the best forum for addressing environment and climate-related issues, including the trade linkage. Also, since these are still very new policy issues, the domestic policy positioning must first be determined before any international commitments are undertaken.

Some developing countries have also indicated in the recent past that they would like to see the outstanding mandates in the agriculture negotiations resolved first before taking up any new issues or frameworks. In fact, there seems to be clear hesitation among many developing and least developed members on agreeing to a fully open-ended agenda that could bring any number of complex issues to the table, which could then be pushed to be placed on par with outstanding development issues.

## Moving forward

In the end, and perhaps not surprisingly under the circumstances, MC14 turned out to be a dismal show as far as meeting the interests of the majority of developing countries and LDCs on agriculture was concerned. Given the US pressure to obliterate past mandates, the failure to adopt a ministerial declaration on agriculture is no loss for the developing countries and LDCs. But what happens now on the road to MC15 is critical.

These countries must ensure that past promises are kept and that they get the necessary policy space for the development of their agricultural sector, to meet their food security and livelihood needs. This is especially important given the increasing pressure coming on the agriculture sector through bilateral deals being negotiated outside the WTO. At the same time, while emerging issues such as technology and sustainability are important, when, where and how to address these issues remains an open question.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the key issues on the table before MC14, see Ranja Sengupta, 'The 14th Ministerial Conference of the WTO and the outstanding mandates on agriculture: Key issues for developing countries', TWN Briefing Paper, March 2026, available at [https://twn.my/title2/briefing\\_papers/twn/Agriculture%20MC14%20TWNBP%20Mar%202026%20Sengupta.pdf](https://twn.my/title2/briefing_papers/twn/Agriculture%20MC14%20TWNBP%20Mar%202026%20Sengupta.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> 'Public stockholding for food security purposes – Proposal by the African Group, the ACP, and G33', WTO document JOB/AG/229, 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> 'African Group Submission on Agriculture for MC14', WTO document WT/MIN(26)/W/19, 17 March 2026, available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FWT%2FMIN26%2FW19.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>4</sup> 'Proposal on Food Security and Resilience', submission by the LDC Group, WTO document WT/GC/W/980/Rev.1 | TN/AG/W/13, 8 December 2025.
- <sup>5</sup> 'G-33 Ministerial Statement at the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference on Priorities and Collective Action toward Advancing Inclusive WTO Agricultural Negotiation post MC14', WTO document WT/MIN(26)/27, 26 March 2026, available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FWT%2FMIN26%2F27.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>6</sup> 'Draft Ministerial Decision on Promoting Food Security and Resilience in the Multilateral Trading System: Communication from Indonesia', WTO document TN/AG/W/14, 27 January 2026.
- <sup>7</sup> WTO document JOB/AG/205/Rev.2, 2023, by the African Group, and WTO document JOB/AG/49, 2021, by the G-33.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Reform of Agricultural Trade in the Form of Market Access: Communication from Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay', WTO document JOB/AG/255/Rev.1, 5 December 2025.
- <sup>9</sup> 'Bamako Ministerial Decision on Cotton: Communication from the Co-Sponsors of the Sectoral Initiative in Favour of Cotton plus Côte d'Ivoire', WTO document WT/MIN(26)/1 | TN/AG/GEN/56 | TN/AG/SCC/GEN/27, 4 December 2025, available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FTN%2FAG%2FGEN56.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>10</sup> See D. Ravi Kanth, 'WTO: Rebuffing Cotton-Four's hopes, US rejects cotton outcome for MC14', *SUNS* #10337, 21 November 2025, available at <https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2025/ti251108.htm>
- <sup>11</sup> 'Ministerial Decision on World Food Programme (WFP) Food Purchases: Exemptions from Export Prohibitions or Restrictions', WTO document WT/MIN(22)/29, adopted on 17 June 2022, available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/MIN22/29.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>12</sup> See Ranja Sengupta, 'Extra AMS entitlements under the WTO Agreement on Agriculture continue to confer additional policy space for developed countries', TWN Briefing Paper, April 2023, available at [https://twn.my/title2/briefing\\_papers/twn/AMS%20entitlements%20TWNBP%20Apr%202023%20Sengupta.pdf](https://twn.my/title2/briefing_papers/twn/AMS%20entitlements%20TWNBP%20Apr%202023%20Sengupta.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> See Sachin Kumar Sharma et al., 'Revisiting Domestic Support Negotiations at the WTO: Ensuring a Level Playing Field', Working Paper No. CWS/WP/200/56, Centre for WTO Studies, June 2020, available at <https://wtocentre.iift.ac.in/workingpaper/WorkingPaper56.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> See WTO document JOB/AG/242/Rev.1, submitted by the African Group and Pakistan, 2023, and WTO document JOB/AG/216/Rev.1, submitted by India, 2023.
- <sup>15</sup> See WTO documents JOB/AG/245 and JOB/AG/243 submitted in 2023 by the Cairns Group and Costa Rica respectively.
- <sup>16</sup> See D. Ravi Kanth, 'Trade: WTO farm talks stall as chair rules out draft text for MC14', *SUNS* #10297, 25 September 2025, available at <https://twn.my/title2/wto.info/2025/ti250917.htm>
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, 'Reform of Agricultural Trade in the Form of Market Access: Communication from Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay', WTO document JOB/AG/255/Rev.1, 5 December 2025.

- <sup>18</sup> For an analysis of the proposals submitted ahead of MC14, see Ranja Sengupta, ‘The 14th Ministerial Conference of the WTO and the outstanding mandates on agriculture: Key issues for developing countries’, TWN Briefing Paper, March 2026, available at [https://twn.my/title2/briefing\\_papers/twn/Agriculture%20MC14%20TWNBP%20Mar%202026%20Sengupta.pdf](https://twn.my/title2/briefing_papers/twn/Agriculture%20MC14%20TWNBP%20Mar%202026%20Sengupta.pdf)
- <sup>19</sup> ‘Draft Declaration on Agriculture, Trade and Global Food Security’, WTO document WT/MIN(26)/W/12, 16 March 2026 (earlier JOB/AG/273/Rev.1, 5 March 2026), available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FWT%2FMIN26%2FW12.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>20</sup> See the ‘Statement on the Importance of Reform of Agricultural Trade – Communication from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay’, WTO document WT/MIN(26)/31 | JOB/AG/275, 28 March 2026, available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FJOBS%2FAG%2F275.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>21</sup> See, for example, WTO document JOB/AG/272 submitted by Argentina, 20 February 2026.
- <sup>22</sup> For example, developing countries and LDCs had agreed to the Trade Facilitation Agreement in the Bali Ministerial Conference in 2013, in return for the interim ‘peace clause’ on PSH and the promise of a permanent solution by 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> The Special Safeguard provisions under Article 5 of the AoA already allow all developed countries and a handful of developing countries to have recourse to a safeguard mechanism that is very similar to the SSM demanded by developing countries and LDCs.
- <sup>24</sup> ‘Draft Declaration on Possible New Approaches to Advance Agricultural Negotiations’, WTO document WT/MIN(26)/W/22, 28 March 2026, <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FWT%2FMIN26%2FW22.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>25</sup> Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Iceland, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Peru, Switzerland, Ukraine and Uruguay.
- <sup>26</sup> ‘Draft Ministerial Decision for a Dialogue on Emerging Agricultural Trade Issues’, WTO document WT/MIN(26)/W/6/Rev.3, 24 March 2026; revised version WT/MIN(26)/40, 31 March 2026, available at <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=Q%3A%2FWT%2FMIN26%2F40.pdf&Open=True>
- <sup>27</sup> See D. Ravi Kanth, ‘WTO: Retreat on “sustainable agriculture” fails to bring about consensus’, *SUNS* #10218, 9 May 2025.