

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

14th Ministerial Conference

The WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Yaoundé, Cameroon, concluded on 30 March 2026 with the adoption of decisions relating to fisheries subsidies, small economies, and special and differential treatment for developing economies. Ministers came close to adopting texts on WTO reform and e-commerce but could not reach consensus. Discussions on outstanding issues are continuing in Geneva.



Concluding session of MC14 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

MC14 took place at a time of severe geopolitical tensions as economies around the world faced the consequences of the conflict in the Middle East and other ongoing issues affecting global trade.

The conference, which took place from 26 to 30 March, brought together almost 2,000 trade officials, including 77 ministers and 26 vice ministers, from the WTO's 166 members as well as representatives from civil society and the business community.

In her opening remarks, Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said she was hopeful the gathering of trade ministers would find the political will to overcome differences and advance work on important topics on the MC14 agenda despite the difficulties facing the multilateral trading system.

DG Okonjo-Iweala said: "It is no secret that the world trading system is experiencing the worst disruptions in the past 80 years. The world order and multilateral system we used to know has irrevocably changed. We must look



to the future. That means figuring out what worked well in the old order, so we can keep it and build on it. It means figuring out what did not work well, so we can repair it. And it also means identifying the gaps in the renewed order we are shaping, so we can close them."

The opening session included a celebration of the entry into force of the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies earlier this year. Three WTO members - Paraguay, Samoa, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines - deposited their instruments of acceptance, bringing the number of WTO members having formally accepted the Agreement to 119.

WTO reform was an important area of work during the conference, with ministers actively engaged in breakout sessions on various topics, including

WTO foundational issues, decision-making, past mandates, development and level playing field issues. Each session was guided by a minister-facilitator, who fostered discussions aimed at guiding substantive work beyond MC14.

Ministerial sessions also took place on dispute settlement reform, fisheries subsidies, the incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement into the WTO framework, the e-commerce work programme and moratorium, agriculture, and development (including issues related to least developed countries). Minister-facilitators guided the discussions, with participants seeking to provide political direction for the work ahead.

The discussions followed on from a number of events held on the eve of the conference. These included the

Opening ceremony of MC14.





Ministerial Session on E-commerce Work Programme and Moratorium.

Below: Ministerial Session on Agriculture.

launch of Phase 3 of the Enhanced Integrated Framework, a programme dedicated to helping least developed countries use trade as an engine of growth. Other events included a Business Forum, which brought together the public and private sectors to discuss key challenges facing the multilateral trading system, and the first-ever Civil Society Dialogue, which invited African civil society leaders and experts to exchange views on how global trade can boost Africa's growth.

On Day 2 of the Conference, 66 WTO members, covering approximately 70 per cent of global trade, adopted a pathway to bring into force the Agreement on Electronic Commerce through interim arrangements while continuing to work towards its incorporation into the WTO legal framework of rules. The Agreement is the world's first set of global digital trade rules.

The closing ceremony saw the adoption of three decisions:

- a Ministerial Decision on Fisheries Subsidies committing members to continue to engage in negotiations on fisheries subsidies, with the aim of making recommendations to MC15 to achieve comprehensive disciplines on fisheries subsidies
- a decision on improving the integration of small economies into the multilateral trading system

- a decision on improving implementation of the provisions of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures Agreement and the Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement relating to special and differential treatment for developing economies.

WTO members reached a high level of convergence on a WTO reform work plan. However, the draft declaration could not be adopted as it became interlinked with a decision on the work programme on e-commerce and the extension of the e-commerce moratorium (see page 53), where

members were unable to reach consensus in the time available. The draft declaration on WTO reform and a draft decision on e-commerce were annexed to the summary of the MC14 Chair, who told members to conclude their negotiations in Geneva.

At the closing ceremony, the Chair of MC14, Cameroon's Minister of Trade Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana, said ministers worked to conclude as many issues as possible across the various areas of negotiation during the four-day meeting. He thanked ministers and delegations for their "tireless work" and commended





them for having “shown constructive participation through very long days and short nights”.

However, “we ran out of time”, he said, with regard to several outstanding issues, including the WTO’s work programme on electronic commerce and the continuation of the existing moratoriums on customs duties for electronic transmissions and non-violation complaints under the Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). The MC14 Chair recommended that discussions on these topics continue in Geneva.

In her closing remarks, DG Okonjo-Iweala welcomed progress in the discussions on a work programme for advancing talks on WTO reform, the decision on advancing work on

further disciplines on harmful fisheries subsidies, and talks on other issues. “A lot was accomplished,” she said. “We decided to work differently.

I think we have a new WTO way of working to modernize the way we do business, so we can be more nimble, more responsive as we move forward.” She suggested members use the draft texts developed over the four days of ministerial discussions to finalize agreements on outstanding issues in Geneva.

At the end of the conference, WTO members participating in the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement issued a joint ministerial declaration underlining that 165 out of the WTO’s 166 members now support incorporating the Agreement into the WTO framework as a plurilateral agreement and committing

participants to continue exploring practical pathways for its effective implementation.

DG Okonjo-Iweala congratulates MC14 Chair Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana at closing session of Conference.

