

# High-Level Workshop on Africa's Role in Shaping WTO Reform for a Sustainable and Inclusive Future

Star Land Hotel, Yaoundé, Cameroon  
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## Executive Summary

Around 60 policymakers, academics, representatives from international organizations and civil society representatives gathered in Yaoundé, Cameroon for a day and a half workshop ahead of the World Trade Organization 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14). The focus of the workshop was to discuss Africa's role in the ongoing WTO reform process, which was the key agenda item for MC14. This included explorations of what reforms were needed to support African sustainable development, how to strengthen a collective African voice in negotiations, the connections between WTO rules and reform efforts and the mandates of other international fora and regional entities, and the importance of South-South collaboration in both shaping global rules and in implementation. Throughout the event, there was also a strong call for African governments and institutions to strengthen their work to become trade ready, by effectively implementing the African Continent Free Trade Area (AfCTA) and the

national and regional policies and regulatory frameworks necessary to make the continent business and trade ready.

The workshop, which was conducted under Chatham House Rules, began with a frank fireside chat with WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and benefitted from participation with negotiators and the WTO Secretariat. It was organized by the **Remaking Trade Project**, in partnership with **ODI Global**, the **Trade Negotiations and Investment Forum (TNIF)**, the **Institut des Relations Internationale du Cameroun**, the **Forum on Trade, Environment, & the SDGs (TESS)**, and the **South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)**.

## Session 1: WTO at a Crossroads: MC14 and the Reform Agenda

The session situated MC14 as a pivotal moment for redefining the global trade system, particularly in light of shifting geopolitical dynamics and multilateral tensions. At stake is not only the relevance of the WTO, but also its ability to respond to contemporary global challenges in a way that is inclusive, development-oriented, and reflective of current economic realities. A central theme that emerged was that the WTO reform must be people-centred, aligning trade governance with broader developmental objectives. The session underscored that Africa's agency should be proactive rather than reactive and highlighted the critical role of the Africa Group. Current disruptions in the system, particularly shifts in US trade policy, were framed not only as challenges but also as revealing moments, exposing underlying preferences (e.g., demands for reciprocity) and uncovering previously hidden negotiation flexibilities.

Africa's material endowments, including critical minerals such as cobalt and manganese, further enhance its strategic position within the global trade system. These resources create opportunities for African countries (particularly LDCs), to negotiate from a position of strength, moving beyond peripheral participation toward meaningful influence. Finally, the session also highlighted the importance of social legitimacy in the multilateral trading system, distinguishing between normative legitimacy (rules, principles, and formal commitments) and social legitimacy (buy-in, trust, and perceived fairness among members).

## Session 2: Issues of our Time

This session began by examining the importance of bringing people together without treating consensus as equivalent to unanimity. Participants returned to the flexibility that formed part of the original vision of the system, highlighting non-uniformity and flexibility as continuing features that should matter in present reform debates. The discussion

also pointed to the connections between trade and wider issues around reform of the global financial architecture.

Subsidies featured prominently throughout the session. Participants stressed that the relationship between fairness and subsidies should be taken seriously, including the need to think about how subsidy structures might be repurposed in more sustainability-oriented ways. The implications of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism was another key theme, alongside a recognition that there was also an opportunity for Africa to seize a green competitive advantage, including by ensuring it did not miss the opportunity to deliver value addition in critical minerals.

The session also stressed the importance of linking national, regional and multilateral policy processes. Participants also highlighted opportunities for South-South trade and cooperation in environmental goods and services. They also raised issues facing businesses, especially SMEs, including practical considerations such as the cost of doing business, payment systems, market identification and standards compliance. Participants also pointed to digital trade as a key issue of our time, including African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA) implementation challenges at a national level around issues such as cross-border data transfers and electronic facilitation. The discussion noted that African countries are already making real efforts to reform domestic policies so as to take better advantage of global opportunities.

The session also reflected on the place of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in guiding national development plans. Trade was framed not as an end in itself, but as a means, while climate measures were discussed both as trade instruments but also as tools that can support African countries' wider development agendas, when pursued through a more inclusive approach. Participants called for policy coherence between trade, finance and climate, and underscored the role of the private sector and companies in helping African countries trade better and lead on supply-chain resilience.

### **Session 3: Fairness, Development, and the Level Playing Field**

This discussion focused on what fairness should mean in a reformed multilateral trading system, especially from an African development perspective. The discussion examined issues around industrial policy, special and differential treatment, technology transfer, inclusive coalition building and the need to ensure that global rules do not leave African economies locked into structurally unequal outcomes.

Participants began from the view that a substantive increase in trade volumes remains a key priority in this agenda. This was tied directly to the question of space for industrial policy within the WTO reform debate. Against that background, it was argued that Africa

must fight for a new kind of special and differential treatment. Agenda 2063 was invoked as a useful benchmark for asking what kind of policy space is actually needed to achieve continental development objectives.

Participants expressed concern that developing countries may be left behind in the transition to green and digital technologies. They gave particular weight to the operationalisation of Article 66.2 on technology transfer, including the related G90 proposal. Participants also highlighted concern over reform proposals that could weaken the development agenda, including the United States proposal that the mandate of the Committee on Trade and Environment in Special Session be terminated.

To address these challenges, participants explored opportunities for South-South technology-transfer arrangements and for using the AfCFTA Intellectual Property Protocol to expand work on intellectual-property issues beyond the narrower confines of the TRIPS Agreement. More support was also seen as necessary to help developing countries build the capacities required to engage these issues effectively.

The session also explored the value of focusing on areas of convergence, building coalitions and promoting collaboration. Participants discussed the need to identify collaborative pathways that genuinely advance technology and skills transfer. They also explored how Africa, China and the European Union might work together around the critical raw materials agenda in ways that are grounded in present realities and capable of generating innovative approaches.

#### **Session 4: Governance and Institutional Renewal**

This session focused on issues of governance and institutional renewal in the WTO reform process. Participants noted that as negotiations at MC14 opened, there was no consensus on a formal workplan or joint statement for reform, despite intensive discussions led by reform facilitators. However, they expressed cautious optimism that ongoing dialogue could evolve into a more structured process, leading to concrete outcomes by the next Ministerial Conference (MC15).

There was widespread agreement on the importance of ensuring WTO rules deliver for sustainable development, and the need to focus on delivering practical people centered outcomes. But concern was also raised that some of the other foundational principles, such as tariff reduction and removing trade barriers, were eroding. On consensus, while all WTO members remain committed to this principle, in practice it is often interpreted as opting out rather than constructively engaging. Participants highlighted the need for more flexible or “practical consensus” approaches to enable progress without requiring full unanimity. Restoring a fully functioning dispute settlement mechanism remains a priority for many members, and should be central to any reform roadmap.

A major concern raised was the growing tendency for countries—especially larger economies—to pursue trade initiatives outside the WTO framework. Participants noted that this risked marginalizing smaller and developing countries that rely more heavily on multilateral systems and ultimately threatened the stability of the system as a whole. Concerns were also raised about the limited incorporation of African proposals in negotiations (for example, AfCFTA digital trade inputs), the growing disconnect on trade between governments and civil society, and the unequal capacity of smaller countries to engage in bilateral agreements.

Participants called for reform efforts to go beyond high-level discussions and move toward specific, actionable outcomes. Greater transparency, inclusivity, and structured dialogue are needed. WTO reform should not only focus on institutional fixes but also on modernization, including digital trade and emerging global challenges.

## **Session 5: Yaoundé to Geneva: Africa's Contribution to Post-MC14 Reform**

This session offered a summary of the workshop, with facilitators presenting a guiding framework in the form of five key themes that emerged during discussions, which could serve as a basis for ongoing collaboration. Refined based on feedback from participants, these are:

1. Reinforce inclusive governance to amplify Africa's voice in the trading system, including the need for African countries to invest in strengthening governance at home to advance national and regional priorities at the nexus of trade and sustainability and effectively influence the shaping of global trade rules.
2. Ensuring special and differential treatment effectively levels the playing field for African countries, taking account of different levels of development and the varying needs of countries in undertaking and complying with existing and emerging requirements.
3. Ensuring policy space for African green industrialization and value addition which enables structural transformation within the context of the continent's evolving trade arrangements.
4. Fostering regional and continental cooperation to enable more effective bargaining power and project shared trade priorities into international economic governance.

5. Promoting meaningful access to technology, finance, and digital capacity for inclusive participation in sustainable trade and development.

In discussion, participants emphasized that these themes tied not only to WTO reform, but more broadly to the wider trade system, and should aim to support more meaningful integration of Africa into the multilateral trading system, while also addressing African governance, cooperation, and coordination at home. They also emphasized that themes such as capacity building, special and differential treatment, policy space, green industrialisation, value addition, technology, finance, and digital capacity should not appear as disconnected items. They should instead be presented as part of an integrated framework for African trade engagement and cooperation.