

Sustainable Development and the WTO Reform Agenda:

A Call to Action for Ministers at MC14

As Ministers prepare for the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Yaoundé, Cameroon, we come together as a diverse group of leading stakeholders from business, civil society, and research communities to urge Ministers to seize MC14 as a critical opportunity to put sustainable development firmly at the heart of ongoing WTO reform discussions.

As a diverse group of stakeholders from business, civil society, and research communities, we know that international cooperation on trade is indispensable to economic prosperity, stability, and resilience; employment growth, social inclusion, and decent work; and to fair and just transitions. We need a trading system that provides resilience-building, international support for economic transformation, and diversification in developing countries, including through special and differential treatment, sustainable investment, finance, and Aid for Trade.

We know that cooperation on trade is vital to urgently needed action to accelerate progress at scale to tackle the climate crisis, halt and reverse nature loss, and reduce pollution. Catalysing shifts to sustainable production and consumption requires shifts in what is produced and consumed, how, and by whom, recognizing vast consumption distortions and inequalities.

Around the world, a growing array of businesses is investing in sustainability—driving change across a range of sectors and transforming supply chains. Many are willing to do more—on decarbonization, on inclusivity, on stewardship of nature and resources—but need a trading system that provides positive incentives, while ensuring an effective, transparent, predictable, and fair regulatory environment.

At MC14, Ministers have an indispensable opportunity—and responsibility—to underscore the central role that the rules-based multilateral trading system, with the WTO at its core, has to play in advancing sustainable development, across its three dimensions—economic, social, and environmental.

Ministerial leadership will also be vital to a forward-looking WTO reform process guided by that purpose. We thus call on Ministers individually and collectively to seize MC14 to:

1. Clearly and strongly reaffirm sustainable development as a core underlying objective of the multilateral trading system, as explicitly recognized in the *Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the WTO*.
2. Emphasize that WTO reform discussions must be anchored in the pursuit of a WTO that works for sustainable development, placing people and the planet at its heart.

A WTO reform agenda that does not grapple directly with how to equip the multilateral trading system to tackle the real-world sustainability challenges that governments, businesses, and communities face every day, everywhere—and that are intensifying by day—is destined to irrelevance. We cannot afford to wait.

Now is the time to proactively shape trade and strengthen inclusive international cooperation on trade rules and policies to drive the economic transformations required to deliver development outcomes—particularly for the African region where the WTO Ministerial Conference will take place for the first time since 2015—and to tackle urgent environmental challenges ambitiously, effectively, and fairly.

At MC14, all eyes will be on how WTO members can advance on much-needed reform of the multilateral trading system. At the top of the agenda for Ministers at MC14 is how to establish a pathway for reform discussions on WTO decision-making and the dispute settlement system, on development, a more level playing field for trade, and other “issues of our time.” As part of these discussions, many Members have expressed a desire to discuss foundational issues, such as the role of the WTO in a rapidly changing economic landscape and in light of emerging challenges.

The evidence is clear: economic and social inequalities, widening development gaps, hunger, food and nutrition insecurity, and intensifying environmental crises are all central sustainable development challenges facing the global economy and trade. They present enormous risks for trade and prosperity of all WTO members and for companies everywhere—from large-scale multinational companies to micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and smallholder farmers—and are particularly devastating for the poorest and most vulnerable economies and communities, especially least developed countries (LDCs).

At present, however, discussions on the WTO reform agenda do not adequately reflect these stark realities, nor the central role that cooperation and action on trade can and should play in advancing progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nor do the WTO reform discussions reflect the significant upswing in engagement on sustainability issues across the WTO in recent years, with the recent entry into force of the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement being the most prominent example.

Reaffirming sustainable development as a core objective of the WTO would provide a clarifying purpose for the multilateral trade system in the 21st century and a much-needed anchor for reform discussions. A failure of Ministers to speak up at MC14 on the need for the WTO to make a more proactive contribution to sustainability will further delay urgently needed proactive, collective action and squander an array of opportunities for inclusive trade cooperation to support people and planet in tandem.

List of Signatories

- African Future Policies Hub
- Business for Nature
- Center on Inclusive Trade and Development (CITD) at Georgetown Law
- Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)
- Citizen’s Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
- Conservation International
- CUTS International - Consumer Unity & Trust Society
- E3G
- Forum on Trade, Environment & the SDGs (TESS)
- German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)
- International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)
- ODI Global
- Remaking Trade for a Sustainable Future
- Trade Negotiations and Investment Forum (TNIF)
- tralac
- We Mean Business Coalition
- World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD)
- World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

