



Conclusion of WTO 14th Ministerial Conference in Yaoundé: Reflections from African Civil Society Organisations

The World Trade Organisation 14th Ministerial Conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon, ended in a deadlock on 30th March 2026 in Yaoundé, with most issues referred to Geneva, Switzerland, for further work while others seemed to have lapsed.

At the end of the 4 days, Ministers adopted only two decisions- integrating small economies into the multilateral trading system and enhancing special and differential treatment in the provisions on sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical barriers to trade.

The rest of the issues were sent to Geneva for further work. Director General (DG) of the WTO during the last informal Heads of Delegation meeting listed them as follows: i) the draft Yaoundé Ministerial Declaration on WTO Reform and Work Plan; 2)The draft Ministerial Decision on Electronic Commerce; 3) draft Ministerial Decision on the Moratorium on TRIPS Non-Violation and Situation Complaints; 4)The draft Ministerial Decision on Fisheries Subsidies; 5)The Least Developed Countries (LDC) package.

The Ministerial Conference failed to renew the moratorium on electronic transmissions-an agreement that bars members from imposing custom duties on goods that are transmitted electronically. Traditionally, this is renewed together with the TRIPS Non-violation and Situation Complaints, which was also not renewed.

There was a deadlock between the United States and Brazil on the renewal of the moratorium on electronic transmissions. Brazil insisted that the moratorium be renewed for 2 years, as has been the practice in past ministerial conferences, while the US initially demanded a permanent moratorium and later backed down to a five -year period.

As the clock ticked towards midnight, an informal meeting of Heads of Delegation was convened where the DG briefed members on developments. After a long wait the chairperson of the Conference, Minister Luc Magloire Mbanga Atangana of Cameroon, finally brought the proceedings to a close.

Earlier on in the day, the US had blocked any likely outcome on agriculture and demanded a reset in the agricultural negotiations.

Reacting to the issue of Agriculture, Jane Nalunga, Executive Director of SEATINI-Uganda said, 'at this ministerial too, no concrete decisions were adopted to tackle long standing demands such as domestic support, market access, public stockholding and special safeguard mechanism. This continued inaction is deeply concerning'.

Faith Lumonya, from Public Services International, echoed similar views by saying, 'It is not impressive that African countries have once again left a Ministerial without a real decision on

agriculture. The process discarded discussions on long-pending mandated issue of cotton subsidies as demanded by the Cotton-4 countries. At the same time, some members of the WTO decided to advance so called "new approaches" that unfortunately disregard the demands for continued negotiations on a permanent solution for public stockholding programs for food security.

Another issue that was topical on the agenda of MC14 was the Investment Facilitation Agreement. Negotiated by some members, the plan was to incorporate it into the rules book of the WTO. For this, many trade experts had warned of its systemic implications as formal adoption would open the floodgate for similar agreements and that will undermine the future of multilateralism and introduce the fragmentation that the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) intended to cure.

Reacting to this, Sylvester Bagooro, TWN-Africa, argued that the Agreement, beyond the fancy title, is a mask for foreign influence in affairs of commodity dependent African economies and other developing countries' economies as well. Investments rules are more about how foreign investors are treated as against domestic investors. He continued by saying that Africa has the Investment Protocol under the African Continental Free Trade Area that can protect any investment on the Continent, and hence there is no need for African countries to lock themselves in multilateral rules on investment with adversarial arbitrations.

Commenting on the process and design of the Ministerial, Mounirou Kane of ENDA Cacid, based in Senegal, observed that there was heated and intense debates on certain topics and discussion resulting in what can only be described as the Yaoundé Package, a painful birth. 'In spite of the breakout sessions, which dispersed members of the Africa Group, the delegates stood their ground for the interest of the continent" Mounirou Kane commended.

Speaking on labour movement issues, Paula France Ndessomin from Industrial, a global trade union had this to say "the WTO Ministerial in Yaoundé, could have been an opportunity to advance the issues of policy space that could enhance the capacity of African countries to create jobs for the teeming youth, but that was not the case, regrettably. Workers and communities need fairer and more equitable rules that put the issues of workers at the centre.