

MC14 in Yaoundé: Process and Modalities

Vahini Naidu, Trade for Development Programme, South Centre

An Analytical Note on the DG's Revised Road to Yaoundé MC14 Working Draft (JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1), 26 January 2026

Abstract

This paper provides an analytical assessment of the revised “Road to Yaoundé” for the Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14). It examines the design of the proposed Ministerial programme and process, with a focus on their implications for inclusivity, balance, collective ministerial engagement, and the legitimacy of outcomes. The analysis considers how structural and procedural choices may shape ministerial deliberation and political signalling at MC14, particularly in light of the long-overdue fulfilment of development mandates and growing systemic challenges facing the multilateral trading system.

1. Purpose and scope

This note provides an analytical assessment of the working draft communication titled “Revised Road to Yaoundé” for the Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14), issued by the Director-General and Chairperson of the Trade Negotiations Committee, as set out in JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1.¹ It focuses on the design of the draft Ministerial programme and process, and examines their implications for inclusivity, collective ministerial engagement, and the legitimacy of outcomes.

The note seeks to highlight how specific structural and procedural choices may shape ministerial deliberation and political signalling at MC14, particularly in light of the long-overdue fulfilment of development mandates and growing systemic challenges facing the multilateral trading system.

2. Overall structure and allocation of ministerial time

The revised programme allocates the largest continuous blocks of prime daytime ministerial time on Thursday 26 March and Friday 27 March to reform-oriented breakout sessions, which together occupy most of the two days and are scheduled in mid-morning and afternoon slots. By contrast, substantive negotiating mandates, including agriculture, are largely confined to Saturday 28 March, alongside several other subject-specific sessions within a compressed schedule. Plenary sessions are scheduled predominantly in early morning hours.

Dispute settlement, notwithstanding its centrality to the current systemic crisis facing the WTO, is scheduled as a single one-hour update session (08h30–09h30). This is shorter than all other substantive ministerial sessions on the programme, which are allocated two-hour blocks, including agriculture, fisheries subsidies, e-commerce, and sessions on the incorporation of plurilateral agreements, as well as the reform breakout sessions. In addition, the dispute settlement item is framed as an update by the DSB Chairperson rather than as a dedicated space for ministerial-level political exchange.

Collectively, this distribution of time and sequencing has implications for the relative visibility and political prioritisation of long-standing mandates that remain unresolved, including

¹ This note is a streamlined public adaptation of analytical notes previously shared with developing country delegations in advance of the consultations on JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1.

agriculture, development-related issues, and dispute settlement. It also raises questions as to where cross-cutting proposals or issues that cut across reform and substantive tracks are expected to be addressed within the current programme structure.

3. Collective ministerial engagement and fragmentation

Across the Conference, Ministers are scheduled to spend significantly more time in parallel breakout sessions and bilateral or group coordination meetings than in shared plenary settings. Based on the current draft programme, collective ministerial sessions amount to roughly ten to twelve hours over the course of the Conference, while more than twenty hours of ministerial time are structured around parallel or fragmented formats, particularly on Thursday 26 March and Friday 27 March. As a result, the largest continuous blocks of ministerial time involve Ministers meeting in parallel rather than collectively.

For a Ministerial Conference convened after a two-year interval, and against the backdrop of heightened trade tensions, the proliferation of unilateral measures, and a broader erosion of trust in multilateral disciplines, this level of fragmentation has implications for the political function of the Conference itself. Limited shared ministerial time may constrain opportunities for Ministers to engage directly with one another on systemic challenges, to test political red lines collectively, or to send coherent and visible political signals on the direction of the organization.

The structure also reduces the number of moments in which Ministers are present together as a Member-driven organization, potentially shifting the centre of gravity of the Conference away from collective ministerial deliberation and toward smaller, more dispersed exchanges. This has implications for how authority, ownership, and political responsibility are exercised at the Ministerial level.

4. Breakout formats and unresolved process questions

The reliance on extensive breakout formats mirrors approaches used in Geneva, where experience has shown that parallel discussions can absorb substantive differences into facilitator summaries rather than enable direct ministerial exchange. Under the current design, each reform theme is to be discussed in seven to ten breakout groups meeting simultaneously, with the precise number to be confirmed. This implies that, across the reform agenda, Ministers will be dispersed across several dozen parallel discussions, limiting opportunities for direct exchange across the full Membership.

Each breakout group is to be co-facilitated by two Ministers, implying that between fourteen and twenty Ministers would be required to serve as facilitators for a single reform theme. At the same time, there is no public indication of how many Ministers have confirmed their attendance to date, nor how facilitator roles would be managed in the event of partial participation. This introduces uncertainty regarding the practical functioning of the breakout format.

While the document indicates that breakout groups will be balanced by geography, level of development, and diversity of perspectives, it does not specify how these criteria will be operationalised. There is limited clarity regarding group composition, allocation of Members, management of speaking time, or the parameters that facilitators are expected to apply when summarising discussions. These unresolved process questions have implications for transparency, consistency, and confidence in how ministerial exchanges are reflected beyond the breakout rooms.

These unresolved questions regarding facilitation and reporting at the breakout level are closely linked to the broader uncertainty surrounding the form, authority, and status of any consolidated record or outcome emerging from MC14, as discussed in Paragraph 12.

5. Implications for developing-country coalitions

Large developing-country coalitions such as the African Group, LDC Group and ACP Group, representing more than forty and, in some configurations, over sixty Members, have traditionally relied on collective presence, coordinated messaging, and the ability to reinforce group positions through multiple interventions at Ministerial Conferences. Fragmented participation across parallel breakout sessions raises practical questions as to how such coalitions can consistently articulate and reinforce common positions when their Ministers are dispersed across different rooms and discussions.

It is also reasonable to assume that some Ministers from these coalitions may be designated as breakout facilitators. This dual role may further complicate coalition coordination, as facilitator responsibilities could limit the scope for those Ministers to actively articulate or reinforce coalition positions within their assigned groups. In addition, practices in some reform discussions have discouraged repetition of positions already delivered by coordinators or have limited interventions where group positions have been expressed. These dynamics risk partial or uneven reflection of coalition views in facilitator reports.

6. Role of bilaterals and group coordination meetings

The programme allocates significant time to bilateral and group coordination meetings, yet their function within the overall Ministerial process is not clearly articulated. It remains unclear whether these formats are expected to serve as venues for negotiations or political trade-offs, or how any understandings reached in such settings would be transmitted back to the full membership.

Given past sensitivities around small-group processes, including concerns associated with Green Room practices, the absence of clarity regarding the sequencing, transparency, and multilateralisation of such discussions has implications for inclusivity and confidence in the Ministerial process as a whole.

7. MC14 as an African-hosted Ministerial

MC14 is being presented as a Ministerial Conference held on African soil, with repeated emphasis on development and African priorities. At the same time, the programme structure relies heavily on parallel formats that disperse Ministers and coalitions for much of the Conference. This raises questions about the extent to which the format enables collective political visibility and signalling by African and other developing-country Members, and how development priorities are articulated within the overall Ministerial narrative.

8. Treatment of development and Special and Differential Treatment

The programme groups Development and Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) within a single reform breakout alongside decision-making and level-playing-field issues. This configuration differs from the approach taken in most reform submissions, which generally recognise development as a core objective of the WTO, reflected in the Marrakesh Agreement, and treat S&DT as one of several instruments through which development concerns are addressed, rather than as a proxy for development itself.

At present, there are no active negotiations on S&DT, but rather a range of papers reflecting divergent perspectives. In this context, a stand-alone ministerial discussion on S&DT may lack a clear operational focus. At the same time, concentrating development within a single

breakout may limit systematic consideration of development implications in other reform and substantive discussions, despite development being relevant across a wide range of WTO disciplines.

Experience with S&DT implementation also illustrates the complexity of the development question. Many S&DT provisions across WTO agreements have, over time, taken the form of transitional periods, best-endeavour language, or narrowly framed flexibilities, and progress in making such provisions precise, effective, and operational has remained limited despite repeated Ministerial mandates. This suggests that a meaningful discussion on development also requires reflection on how existing provisions have operated in practice.

The structure of the reform discussions therefore has implications for whether development is approached as a cross-cutting organising dimension of the WTO's work, grounded in treaty objectives and implementation experience, or whether it is treated as a thematic issue linked narrowly to S&DT.

9. Application of the Geneva-first principle

The revised document repeatedly references the Geneva-first principle, yet its practical application remains unclear. In particular, while criteria are outlined for referring issues to Ministers, it is not evident how matters that have not reached "convergence" in Geneva are selected for ministerial discussion, or how Ministers are expected to engage with unresolved or partially converged elements.

The inclusion of sessions designated "upon Members' request", including on the incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement and the e-commerce agreement, illustrates this ambiguity. The absence of greater clarity regarding the operational meaning of the Geneva-first principle has implications for managing expectations around ministerial outcomes and for defining the scope of political engagement at MC14.

10. Scope and purpose of discussions on past mandates

The programme includes a reform theme described as a "Ministerial Conversation on past mandates", without clarifying which mandates are covered, the time period to which the discussion relates, or the intended function of the session. In particular, it is not specified whether Ministers are expected to review the implementation of agreed mandates, reaffirm existing instructions, identify areas where follow-up is pending, or engage in broader reflection on the status or interpretation of prior Ministerial decisions and declarations.

This lack of specification has implications for predictability and institutional continuity, particularly given past debates over the legal status and interpretation of Ministerial mandates. Without a clearer articulation of purpose, the discussion risks moving away from assessing implementation and follow-up on agreed mandates and instead focusing on broader debates about which mandates remain valid, how they should be interpreted, or whether they continue to apply, providing limited direction for subsequent work in Geneva.

11. Selective attention to past outcomes

The programme includes a dedicated Ministerial session on fisheries subsidies, reflecting the recent entry into force of the Agreement, its prior consideration at MC13, and the fact that it has already been marked through dedicated events and acknowledgements in Geneva. By contrast, there is no comparable space for a structured Ministerial review or follow-up on other outcomes agreed at MC13, including development-related decisions and declarations where implementation is ongoing or where follow-up actions remain pending.

This difference shows an imbalance in Ministerial engagement with past outcomes, particularly with respect to ensuring visibility, accountability, and political attention to the implementation of agreed commitments beyond those that have already reached formal conclusion.

12. Intended outcomes and reporting arrangements

With the December cut-off behind, there remains limited clarity regarding the intended outcome of MC14. While the revised Road to Yaoundé does not exclude the possibility of a consensus outcome document, there is currently no visible process in Geneva for negotiating such a document. This differs from common past Ministerial practice, where, even in challenging negotiating environments, efforts were typically made to explore and develop a possible consensus outcome in advance of the Conference. In the absence of greater clarity, there is a risk that the absence of a negotiated outcome may come to be treated as the default scenario rather than as a contingency.

In this context, the prospect of a Chair's summary appears to be emerging as a possible means of recording the Conference. However, there is limited information on whether such a summary is envisaged, who would prepare it, how Members would be able to comment on or correct it, or what formal status it would carry. Nor is it clear how summaries emerging from multiple breakout discussions would be consolidated into a single authoritative record.

The lack of clarity regarding outcomes, reporting authority, and the status of any consolidated record has implications for Member confidence and the perceived legitimacy of MC14 outputs, particularly where ministerial discussions are expected to inform subsequent work in Geneva.

13. Selection of reform themes

The basis on which the reform breakout themes were identified is not explained. While the programme refers to foundational principles such as Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) treatment, it provides limited space to engage with the concrete developments that are currently testing those principles. These include the growing use of unilateral trade measures, increasing recourse to national or essential security rationales, and a wider shift toward arrangements and practices operating outside agreed multilateral processes.

In the current environment, where the need to "restore" or "save" the WTO is frequently invoked, the absence of structured discussion on these systemic stresses is notable. Many Members are experiencing the practical effects of heightened uncertainty and reduced predictability in the application of trade rules. Yet the reform agenda, as currently framed, appears to prioritise reaffirmation of abstract principles over examination of the practices that are most visibly reshaping how those principles function in practice.

This is particularly evident in relation to MFN. While MFN remains a cornerstone of the multilateral trading system, its operation increasingly coexists with a proliferation of bilateral and preferential trade arrangements, including instruments whose legal relationship with WTO rules is not always clear. The expanding role of such arrangements, alongside unilateral measures and security-based actions, raises questions about how MFN is being preserved, qualified, or bypassed in practice, and what this means for Members that are not parties to those arrangements.

Taken together, the current selection of reform themes raises questions about the scope and balance of the reform exercise. A reform agenda that does not engage directly with the interaction between MFN, unilateral actions, security-based measures, and the growing reliance on bilateral or preferential arrangements risks falling short of the realities confronting much of the Membership. For reform discussions to command confidence, they need to

address not only shared principles, but also the evolving trade landscape in which those principles are being applied.

Concluding observations

The revised Road to Yaoundé reflects choices on structure, sequencing, and format that will shape ministerial engagement, priority-setting, and the perceived legitimacy of MC14 outcomes. The reliance on parallel formats, limited shared ministerial time, and uncertainty around reporting and intended outputs have implications for inclusivity, balance, and collective ownership of the Ministerial process.

In a context of ongoing systemic pressures and unresolved development mandates, process design matters. How MC14 is organised and recorded will influence confidence in the Conference as a forum for collective political engagement and in the WTO's ability to respond credibly to the challenges confronting its Membership.

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For enquiries, please contact: Naidu@southcentre.int or visit <https://www.southcentre.int/>