

MC14 in Yaoundé: Updated Process and Modalities

By Vahini Naidu

An Analytical Note on the Director-General's Revised Road to Yaoundé MC14 Working Draft, (JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1/Rev.1), 11 February 2026

Abstract

This note examines the Revised Road to Yaoundé for the Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) and the implications of its programme, sequencing, and institutional management. It situates the revised agenda within current dynamics in Geneva and assesses how process choices shape ministerial engagement, priority-setting, and the handling of long-standing development mandates. Drawing on lessons from earlier Ministerial Conferences, the note highlights the risks that compressed formats, limited transparency, and facilitator-driven structures pose for collective ownership and trust. It argues that the credibility of MC14 will depend on whether Members perceive the process as inclusive and balanced, and whether the Ministerial provides a clear and legitimate pathway for shaping the WTO's future direction. The note also includes recommendations.

1. Introduction

This note provides an updated analytical assessment of the “Revised Road to Yaoundé” for the Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14), as set out in the communication dated 5 February 2026 by the Director-General (DG) and Chairperson of the Trade Negotiations Committee (JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1/Rev.1). It builds on an earlier South Centre analytical note prepared in January 2026 and reflects the adjustments made following Member consultations on the draft programme.¹ This note also includes recommendations. For several months, parts of the Membership, supported by the Secretariat, have advanced the view that MC14 will not be a negotiating Ministerial. This characterisation has shaped expectations around what the Conference is meant to deliver and has underpinned a programme framed around reform, reflection, and political guidance rather than negotiated outcomes. Issues of priority to some Members are steadily being prepared for ministerial deliberation in Yaoundé, while a number of long-standing negotiating issues of central importance to developing countries continue to encounter procedural and substantive barriers. The effect is twofold. These issues are less likely to reach the Ministerial agenda, and the scope for any balanced outcome, in which they form part of an overall package of trade-offs, is also reduced.

Against this background, MC14 is beginning to resemble the earlier days in the WTO's history when ambition, imbalance, and process collided. It is reminiscent of the Seattle Ministerial Conference in 1999, and of the subsequent collapse at Cancún in 2003. Seattle took place amid high expectations for the organisation's future, unresolved mandated issues, and deep divisions over the scope and direction of WTO work. New agendas were advanced without sufficient convergence, while implementation and development concerns were sidelined. These substantive tensions were compounded by procedural weaknesses, including an overloaded agenda, shifting and overlapping small group configurations, and opaque “Green Room” meetings in which most developing countries were not invited to participate, even on

¹ Vahini Naidu, “MC14 in Yaoundé: Process and Modalities: An Analytical Note on the DG's Revised Road to Yaoundé MC14 Working Draft (JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1), 26 January 2026,” Analytical Note, South Centre, 26 January 2026, <https://www.southcentre.int/analytical-note-26-january-2026/>

issues of direct importance to them. A series of draft ministerial texts circulated under the authority of the Chair, the Secretariat and small groups of major Members, but without clear mandates, line-by-line negotiation or opportunities for the wider Membership to engage with and shape the language, leaving many delegations unsure whether those documents were genuinely Member-driven or largely crafted by a few powerful actors.² Ministers were ultimately confronted with too many unresolved questions within a compressed timeframe, without the confidence that the process itself was balanced or inclusive. The Conference ended without agreed outcomes, leaving a lasting imprint on trust in the institution and prompting renewed demands from developing countries for more transparent and inclusive decision making practices.³ While MC14 is not expected to negotiate new binding disciplines comparable to those proposed at Seattle and Cancún, the way in which existing and emerging issues are structured and managed in Yaoundé will nonetheless be critical in shaping Members' confidence in the Ministerial process and its outcomes.

MC14 is unfolding in a different geopolitical and economic context, but certain structural similarities with earlier crisis ministerials are hard to ignore. Agriculture, a core Doha mandate for developing countries, is increasingly being steered in Geneva towards a minimal political declaration rather than a substantive decision with post-MC14 deliverables. Long-standing G90 proposals on special and differential treatment, together with LDC priorities such as graduation, technology transfer and TRIPS non-violation and situation complaints, have struggled to progress through Geneva processes and are now compressed into a single, overloaded "Development including LDC issues" session whose role in decision-making remains unclear. Within the reform track, development and S&DT are treated as one stream among several, placed alongside decision-making and level-playing-field issues in a consolidated reform architecture rather than addressed through the specific Doha mandates and proposals advanced by developing countries. Level-playing-field concerns are similarly elevated despite the absence of consensus in Geneva on their scope, priority or relationship to existing rights and obligations. At the same time, incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement is framed primarily as a procedural step of institutional integration, even though debates about bringing new issues into the WTO rulebook have historically been deeply political, as demonstrated in Seattle and Cancún. For many developing countries, it is this imbalance between how contested reform tracks are advanced and how mandated development issues are handled that gives renewed relevance to the lessons of earlier Ministerials in the run-up to Yaoundé.⁴

The Revised Road to Yaoundé seeks to manage these tensions through a highly structured programme. These choices determine how much space Ministers have to engage directly with one another and, just as importantly, which issues are elevated for political discussion and which remain effectively contained in Geneva. They also play out against a wider systemic strain, in which intensified resort to unilateral trade measures and actions that test or depart from core WTO rules has heightened concerns among many Members about the credibility and even-handedness of the multilateral trading system. Where reform initiatives that do not yet command consensus are advanced to the Ministerial level, while long-standing Doha

² South Centre, 'The post-Cancun legal status of the Singapore issues in the WTO', Analytical Note, SC/TADP/AN/SI/2, November 2003. https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/AN_SI2_The-post-Cancun-legal-Status-of-Singapore-Issues-in-WTO_EN.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ South Centre, 'Chronology of Cancun WTO Ministerial Conference', Analytical Note, September 2003 (SC/TADP/AN/IRI/1); and 'The way forward after Cancun', Analytical Note, SC/TADP/AN/IRI/2, February 2004. https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/AN_IG5_Chronology-of-Cancun-WTO-Ministerial-Conference_EN.pdf

development issues continue to face procedural or negotiating obstacles, the range of political guidance that can realistically emerge to ensure the relevance of WTO is narrowed.

2. From consultation to closure

The January schedule was circulated explicitly as a “draft – schedule of MC14 sessions,” prepared under the responsibility of the Director-General (DG) and shared with Members for consultation during the week of 26 January, with a commitment to reflect Members’ views before transmission to capitals (JOB/TNC/127/Rev.2/Add.1). The revised document circulated on 5 February adopts a different posture. It thanks Members for their engagement during consultations and states that “the following adjustments have been made,” presenting the revised schedule as the product of that process and circulating it for Members’ information.

Formally, the schedule continues to be labelled as a draft and leaves open the possibility for Members to provide further feedback or seek clarification. Substantively, however, the framing has shifted. Its overall structure, sequencing, and time allocations are set out in a consolidated form. In WTO practice, this typically signals that the principal design choices have been taken and that only limited adjustments remain possible.

A separate, though related, issue concerns the institutional pathway through which the programme has been developed. The Revised Road to Yaoundé notes that the schedule was prepared in consultation with the General Council Chair and the WTO Reform Facilitator. At the same time, authority over the structure and sequencing of the Ministerial agenda is exercised primarily by the DG in her capacity as Chair of the Trade Negotiations Committee, under whose authority the document is issued. This differs from established practice, under which the General Council Chair has usually played the central role in shaping the overall Ministerial programme, reflecting the General Council’s position as the highest decision-making body of the WTO between Ministerial Conferences.

The prominence accorded to the WTO reform facilitation track in this process is noteworthy. While reform discussions are clearly important in the current context, the Facilitator does not hold formal chairing authority within the WTO’s decision-making structure. Nevertheless, reform-related considerations are embedded at the core of the programme’s architecture. This institutional configuration has practical implications. It affects which issues are brought forward to the Ministerial level, how they are framed, and the conditions under which Ministers are invited to engage with them.

Against this backdrop, the position of several long-standing Doha-mandated issues warrants attention. Many of these issues, frequently cited in Geneva discussions as potential areas for ministerial outcomes, appear increasingly constrained in the consolidated programme. Issues of particular importance to developing countries are tightly circumscribed, allocated limited time, or addressed indirectly through broader reform discussions rather than as distinct political questions. Once the programme is presented in this consolidated form, opportunities to revisit its underlying balance or sequencing are limited. This pattern, in which a small group shapes the structure and sequencing of work before Ministers arrive, has previously fed concerns about “chair-owned” processes and weakened confidence in the collective ownership of ministerial outcomes.⁵

⁵ On the evolution of ‘chair-owned’ processes and their impact on trust in the WTO, see South Centre, ‘Chronology of Cancun WTO Ministerial Conference’, SC/TADP/AN/IRI/1, September 2003; ‘The way forward after Cancun’, SC/TADP/AN/IRI/2, February 2004; and ‘WTO reform and the crisis of multilateralism’, South Centre, 2020. https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bk_2020_WTO-reform-and-the-crisis-of-multilateralism_EN.pdf

What is also notably absent from the Revised Road to Yaoundé is any indication of how the Conference itself is expected to generate an outcome. Ministerial Conferences have traditionally concluded with a Ministerial Declaration or, where consensus proves elusive, a Chair's Statement reflecting areas of convergence and divergence. The revised programme does not identify a space for negotiating such an outcome, nor does it clarify when or how Ministers would collectively engage with draft language. This is occurring alongside informal discussions in Geneva around a short and carefully limited draft outcome text, intended to avoid reopening difficult substantive issues, but whose possible role at MC14 and the modalities for its consideration are not reflected in the Ministerial programme. In the absence of a designated forum for collective deliberation, the risk is that outcome-shaping shifts to restricted formats operating in parallel to the formal agenda. Past experience, including at MC12 in Geneva and MC13 in Abu Dhabi, shows that when the majority of Ministers are kept busy in high-level ministerial conversations, critical decisions on the overall outcome can gravitate towards small-group settings among the major Members, raising familiar concerns about transparency, participation, and collective ownership.

3. Later start times and compressed days

One visible adjustment concerns start times. Sessions scheduled at 07h00 in the January draft are shifted to later hours. On Thursday 26 and Friday 27 March, sessions now begin at 10h00. On Saturday 28 and Sunday 29 March, sessions begin at 09h00. These changes respond to concerns raised by Members regarding feasibility and delegation fatigue.

At the same time, the number of sessions and agenda items remains unchanged. The practical effect is compression rather than decongestion. Reporting sessions, ministerial discussions, and the sole WTO Reform Transparency Plenary are pushed into late afternoon and evening slots, including a transparency plenary scheduled at 19h30 on Friday 27 March. This reduces time available for informal coordination during the day and places sustained demands on delegations with limited staffing. In a programme built around multiple small-group discussions, the reduced space for informal ministerial exchange outside formal sessions has political consequences. The distribution of sessions across the four days of MC14, including their duration and stated nature, is summarised in the table on MC14 sessions in **Annex 1** to this note.

4. Opening session and political framing

The decision to shorten the opening session responds to concerns among Members about the limited substantive value of extended ceremonial openings. In the January draft, the opening was scheduled from 09h00 to 13h00 on Thursday 26 March and combined welcome remarks, host interventions, the formal transmission of work by the GC Chair, acknowledgements related to accessions, and a celebration of the entry into force of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. The opening session also performs a critical formal procedural function. Under Rule 5 of the Rules of Procedure for sessions of the Ministerial Conference (WT/L/161), the first item of business is the consideration and approval of the agenda.

In practice, the opening session has not typically functioned as a forum for ministerial engagement on agenda content. As in previous Ministerial Conferences, Ministers are not seated with working microphones or flags during the opening. While the Rules of Procedure allow Members to propose additions or amendments to the agenda, including under "Other Business," the format of the opening constrains the practical exercise of those options. Agenda adoption therefore takes place in a controlled setting, limiting the scope for interventions that could delay, reopen, or contest the programme at the outset of the Conference. In Seattle,

similar constraints on Members wishing to intervene at the opening contributed to later claims by developing countries that they had been presented with a fait accompli rather than invited to shape the Conference programme collectively.

The revised schedule shortens the opening to three hours, explicitly in response to concerns about its length. This reduces repetition, particularly around the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement, and frees time for sessions where Ministers are expected to engage directly.

5. Breaks and prayer observance

The revised schedule clearly marks lunch breaks and allocates one hour, from 12h00 to 13h00 on Friday 27 March, for Members observing Jumma prayer. During this time, meeting rooms remain available for bilateral and group coordination meetings. This level of specificity was absent from the January draft and responds directly to practical concerns raised by Members during consultations. It improves predictability and inclusivity without altering substantive discussions.

6. Breakout structures and facilitation

a. Consolidation of reform tracks

The revised schedule reduces the number of WTO reform breakout sessions from five to four. In the January draft, reform discussions included a standalone “Ministerial Conversation on Past Mandates.” In the revised programme, this session is removed as an independent breakout and folded into a combined session on “decision-making and past mandates.” In parallel, the explicit reference to MFN is removed from the title of the foundational issues session.

These adjustments narrow the number of labelled reform tracks without materially reducing the range of issues under discussion. Instead, politically sensitive questions are consolidated into broader categories, reducing their visibility as distinct ministerial topics while retaining them within the overall reform architecture.

b. Group size and constraints on exchange

The internal organisation of breakout sessions is also tightened. The number of groups per breakout is fixed at six, down from a variable range of seven to ten in the January draft. Facilitation shifts from two Minister co-facilitators per group to a single Minister-Facilitator.

Six breakout groups nevertheless remains a large configuration. Assuming broad participation, each group could comprise approximately 25 to 30 Members, even before accounting for uneven ministerial attendance and the DG’s request that delegations limit their size. Groups of this scale inevitably constrain the depth of exchange that can realistically take place within the time available.

c. Listening rooms and transparency

The introduction of listening-in rooms is a constructive response to concerns raised during consultations, particularly by developing countries. These rooms, made available based on demand, allow delegations to follow parallel discussions and reduce information asymmetries across groups.

At the same time, listening rooms do not confer participation rights. Their effectiveness therefore depends heavily on how breakout discussions are summarised and reported, especially given the reduction in WTO Reform Transparency Plenary Sessions from two to one.

d. Breakouts versus the Geneva process

These design choices need to be read alongside developments in Geneva. As noted earlier in this note, the Revised Road to Yaoundé reiterates the “Geneva first” principle, under which substantive work is meant to be completed in Geneva, with Ministers expected to approve outcomes rather than negotiate them. It also indicates that only issues where genuine convergence exists should be taken forward to MC14.

The difficulty is that such convergence does not yet exist across the reform tracks. This has been acknowledged in Geneva itself. The WTO reform facilitator has consistently clarified that his papers, summaries, and the draft post-MC14 work plan are issued under his own responsibility and do not reflect consensus among Members. They are intended to structure discussion rather than to signal agreement. Significant differences remain, both on the substance of reform and on the process through which it is being pursued.

In this context, the purpose of the reform breakouts in Yaoundé is not entirely clear. If reform tracks remain contested in Geneva and text-based work and convergence-building are ongoing, it is difficult to see what Ministers are being asked to deliberate on in breakout discussions organised around the same themes, or how those discussions relate to draft decisions and work plans that have yet to secure broad support. Rather than clarifying the path forward, the current configuration risks blurring the line between facilitator-led scoping work in Geneva and political direction emerging from Ministers.

e. Ministerial engagement without a clear decision space

Across the programme, a total of eight hours is allocated to WTO reform breakout sessions, spread across four themes and conducted in six parallel groups per session. The modalities do not indicate whether the same six Minister-Facilitators will lead all four breakout sessions, nor do they clarify how continuity or consistency across sessions is to be ensured.

With only one WTO Reform Transparency Plenary scheduled, it remains unclear how Ministers, collectively, are expected to engage with or assess what emerges from the breakout discussions. The programme does not specify whether the floor will be opened for Ministers to intervene, ask questions, or clarify how their views have been reflected, including for those who followed discussions through listening rooms.

There is also no indication of the reporting framework. The modalities do not describe whether facilitators will use a common template, how divergences will be recorded, or how differing emphases across groups will be handled. Even if facilitators identify areas of convergence or propose takeaways, the sequence for bringing these together, testing them across the Membership, and establishing any shared understanding is not evident.

The absence of a clear deliberative step linking breakout discussions to collective ministerial consideration weakens the internal logic of the programme. Rather than providing a coherent pathway from discussion to guidance, the structure leaves unresolved how ministerial exchanges are meant to feed into any agreed process or follow-up.

These concerns are heightened by the consolidation of politically sensitive reform items into broad categories and their treatment through parallel small-group formats under time pressure. For many developing countries, experience from earlier Ministerial Conferences has shown that small group, facilitator driven processes, later presented as reflecting “ministerial guidance,” can be used after the fact to anchor contested reform tracks or interpretations of mandates, even where consensus was absent and opportunities to clarify the record were limited.

7. Agriculture and time allocation

Time allocated to agriculture increases in the revised programme. In the January draft, the Ministerial Session on Agriculture was scheduled for two hours. In the revised schedule, it is extended to 2.5 hours, making it the longest single substantive ministerial session in the programme. This adjustment responds to long-standing concerns raised by developing countries regarding the marginalisation of agriculture within Ministerial agendas.

At the same time, the additional time needs to be read in context. The agriculture session remains one among several scheduled on the same day, alongside fisheries subsidies, IFDA incorporation, e-commerce, and development, all within a compressed timeframe. The increase in duration improves visibility but does not alter the overall sequencing of the programme or its linkages with reform discussions earlier in the Conference.

These changes also coincide with parallel discussions in Geneva in which efforts are under way to steer agriculture towards a weak political declaration rather than a Ministerial decision that would provide clear direction or instructions for work after MC14. In this setting, the additional 30 minutes risks appearing largely cosmetic. While it acknowledges developing country concerns at the level of scheduling, it does not, on its own, change the broader negotiating environment or address the underlying question of whether MC14 will deliver concrete guidance on agriculture beyond general reaffirmations.

8. Saturday sessions

Saturday 28 March concentrates a wide range of subject-specific ministerial sessions into a single day, including fisheries subsidies, IFDA incorporation, e-commerce, agriculture, development including LDC issues, and an update on dispute settlement reform. This clustering significantly compresses ministerial attention and raises questions about whether these sessions are intended as decision-making spaces or primarily as platforms for visibility and signalling.

The structuring of the development session is particularly concerning. A single two-hour Ministerial Session on “Development including LDC issues” aggregates a broad set of mandates under one heading. Footnote 3 records that Members indicated interest in discussing LDC graduation, technology transfer, TRIPS non-violation and situation complaints, and the cost of remittances, among others. The programme does not indicate whether any Geneva-based texts linked to these issues, including long-standing proposals advanced by the G90 on special and differential treatment, are expected to be transmitted to Ministers for consideration or adoption. Even assuming a relatively limited number of interventions, the time available would allow only a few minutes per Minister at best. This makes it difficult to assess whether the session is intended as a decision space, a setting for political guidance, or a general exchange of views.

Similar questions arise in relation to agriculture. While the extension of the agriculture session to 2.5 hours responds to repeated calls from developing countries, the programme is silent on whether Ministers will be asked to consider or endorse any draft decisions emerging from Geneva, or whether the session is confined to a high-level exchange without implications for post-MC14 work. As with development, the limited time available constrains the scope for meaningful ministerial engagement across the Membership.

Dispute settlement reform is treated even more narrowly. The reduction of the session from one hour to 30 minutes, framed explicitly as an “update,” points to an informational exercise rather than a setting in which Ministers are expected to exchange views or provide direction,

notwithstanding the central role of dispute settlement in the functioning and credibility of the WTO.

Collectively, the Saturday schedule raises broader questions about the role Ministers are being asked to play. The programme does not indicate which issues, if any, are intended for decision or how ministerial exchanges are expected to translate into agreed guidance or follow-up. In the absence of such clarity, these sessions risk operating largely as placeholders, offering visibility without resolving how development-related mandates and systemic questions are meant to advance through the Ministerial process.

9. Plurilateral agreements and incorporation

The treatment of plurilateral incorporation changes in both framing and timing. In the January draft, incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) and the Agreement on Electronic Commerce was addressed in a single two-hour session titled “Upon Members’ Request – Ministerial Session on Incorporation of Plurilateral Agreements.” In the revised schedule, IFDA is allocated a dedicated 90-minute ministerial session in plenary. By contrast, electronic commerce is addressed in its multilateral track through a 90-minute Ministerial Session on the E-Commerce Work Programme and Moratorium, without a standalone session on incorporation of the plurilateral Agreement on Electronic Commerce.

Removing the phrase “upon Members’ request” and separating the treatment of IFDA and electronic commerce shifts incorporation from an explicitly conditional choice to a routine Ministerial agenda item. This framing makes incorporation appear procedural rather than political, reducing the visibility of the underlying consent question. This differentiation can also be read as a sequencing choice. IFDA has attracted broader participation and has been presented as closer to readiness for institutional integration, while the Agreement on Electronic Commerce has a narrower base of participants and has received less sustained attention in recent Geneva discussions. The revised programme therefore appears to prioritise advancing IFDA incorporation while avoiding a parallel ministerial confrontation on electronic commerce, where convergence remains weaker.

10. Closing arrangements

While the formal timetable for the closing day is unchanged from the January draft, the revised communication of 5 February places greater emphasis on certainty around the Conference’s conclusion, stating that MC14 is scheduled to end no later than 13h00 on 29 March.

This approach adds predictability and reduces logistical uncertainty for delegations scheduled to leave. It also reshapes how the final phase of the Ministerial is likely to unfold, with less room for extended negotiations once the overall picture becomes clear. In past Ministerial Conferences, developing countries have raised concerns with the use of practices such as “stopping the clock,” which were often associated with prolonging negotiations to extract last-minute trade-offs or apply pressure on developing countries. The revised programme is silent on how similar situations would be handled if substantive differences persist, particularly in a Conference that is repeatedly described as non-negotiating. In this sense, the Revised Road to Yaoundé does not simply organise time. It shapes expectations about what MC14 is meant to do, and what it is not.

Recommendations

In light of the observations set out above, a number of procedural and institutional clarifications could help ensure that MC14 proceeds in a manner consistent with established WTO rules and with Members' collective expectations regarding transparency, balance and legal certainty.

1. Reaffirm the Geneva-first principle and discipline the use of texts

Members may wish to reaffirm that only issues and texts on which genuine convergence exists in Geneva should be transmitted to Ministers. Drafts that reflect primarily the views of facilitators or chairs, or that have not been subject to open, membership-wide discussion and convergence, should not be tabled at MC14 as a basis for ministerial guidance or decision. If this principle is not consistently applied across all negotiating issues, Members could underline that longstanding mandated issues currently facing procedural obstacles in Geneva must also be forwarded to Ministers on equal footing.

2. Clarify the purpose and scope of WTO reform breakouts

Where reform issues are nevertheless taken to MC14, Members could seek to rationalise breakout sessions by reducing their number and anchoring them in clearly defined, Member-agreed questions rather than open-ended facilitator texts. Delegations may also wish to seek assurances that any facilitator summaries or breakout "takeaways" are without prejudice to Members' positions, and that discussion of issues such as decision-making practices or the treatment of plurilateral outcomes proceeds only on the basis of explicit, inclusive mandates agreed in Geneva.

3. Strengthen transparency and reporting modalities

Members could call for clear, written modalities governing reporting from breakout sessions. These should include common templates and systematic recording of both convergences and divergences. Under Rule 31, summary records of Ministerial Conference meetings shall be kept by the Secretariat, with the customary GATT practice continued whereby representatives may verify those portions of draft records containing their statements prior to issuance. Modalities should also provide a defined opportunity for Ministers to react in plenary before any form of "political guidance" is inferred. Members may underline that any overall outcome text should be circulated in advance per Rule 23 and discussed in an open, designated forum, rather than emerging from restricted formats.

4. Set boundaries for small-group and 'Green Room' processes

Members could underline that any small-group consultations at MC14, including 'Green Room'-type meetings are not used to negotiate or finalise texts on behalf of the wider Membership. Participation should be transparent and based on interest rather than invitation, with listening-room access for non-participants, prompt written reporting back to all Members, and any documents emerging treated strictly as inputs under the responsibility of their drafters, not portrayed as reflecting consensus unless discussed and accepted in an open ministerial meeting.

5. Prioritise plenary format for WTO reform discussions

The facilitator-led process in Geneva has been tightly managed. It limits even plenary sessions to transparency reports with little opportunity for Members to take the floor. Given that one transparency plenary covers roughly 8 hours of breakouts, Members may wish to propose reallocating all reform time to plenary format. This would allow deeper ministerial conversations on key questions with all Members in the room. With the remaining time,

Ministers could then draft and consider streamlined reform guidance to instruct Geneva work post-MC14. Such an approach would ensure Member-driven dialogue.

6. Disaggregated Plenary Sessions for Footnote 3 and Extended DS Reform

Revisions to the programme are required. For example, there should be separate plenary sessions to operationalise Footnote 3: one on LDC Graduation, one on Technology Transfer, one on TRIPS Non-Violation and Situation Complaints, one on Remittances Costs, and one on General Development issues separate from S&DT. The Dispute Settlement Reform session should also be extended to a discussion by Ministers. This would unbundle the overloaded 2-hour "Development including LDC issues" session on Saturday, while better aligning Friday's "Development and S&DT" reform breakout with clearer ministerial separation, as highlighted in the note's emphasis on distinct Member-identified priorities.

7. Guard against fait accompli outcomes

Members concerned about "chair-owned" processes could signal that documents not subjected to open discussion among all Ministers at MC14, including draft declarations, work plans, reform-related texts or facilitator reports, should not later be presented as enjoying ministerial endorsement under Rule 28 (decisions per Article IX). Where such texts are nonetheless produced, they should be clearly characterised as the responsibility of their authors and should not be used to lock in, pre-structure, or pre-commit post-MC14 work without explicit Member agreement.

8. Prevent surprise texts at MC14 through timely circulation

To guard against texts emerging unexpectedly during MC14 (as at previous ministerial conferences), Members may wish to invoke Rule 23, requiring all proposals and amendments to be introduced in writing and circulated to all representatives at least 12 hours before the meeting at which they are discussed.

9. Safeguard balance between reform tracks and mandated development issues

The Rules of Procedure do not regulate time allocation or thematic sequencing. These are programme design choices. As noted in the analytical sections of this note, the current configuration places significant structural emphasis on reform discussions. Members may wish to recall that time allocation does not substitute for substantive progress. Where agriculture, development, S&DT or LDC-related mandates are addressed in compressed sessions without draft texts or decision pathways, this should not be equated institutionally with reform tracks that are being positioned for structured post-MC14 follow-up. If reform discussions are expected to generate work programmes or structured processes after MC14, comparable clarity could be sought with respect to all other issues and mandates. Such balance would reinforce the perception that the Ministerial is addressing the full range of Members' priorities.

Conclusion

MC14 in Yaoundé is being framed as a non-negotiating Ministerial focused on reform and political guidance. At a time when trust in the WTO is already strained, the way the Ministerial is organised, managed, and reported on will shape perceptions of legitimacy as much as any issue formally on the agenda.

The Revised Road to Yaoundé places reform discussions that do not yet reflect consensus at the centre of the Ministerial programme, while long-standing development mandates are

confined to compressed sessions with limited clarity on whether Ministers will consider texts or provide direction beyond general exchanges. Combined with heavy reliance on parallel breakouts, limited transparency plenaries, and undefined reporting modalities, this configuration risks reinforcing existing concerns about top-down, facilitator-driven processes.

For many developing countries, the relevance of past Ministerials such as Seattle, Cancún, Nairobi and Geneva lies in how trust was affected by the way agendas were set and processes were managed.⁶ Disagreements were compounded when Members felt excluded from shaping priorities or confronted with outcomes that had taken form elsewhere. Yaoundé raises similar questions. Confidence in MC14 will rest on whether Members see the process as one in which they were able to influence the direction of the WTO in a meaningful way, rather than one in which choices were presented as *faits accomplis*.

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

⁶ See South Centre, 'WTO reform and the crisis of multilateralism', 2020, for a discussion of how repeated ministerial failures have shaped current reform debates.

Annex 1

MC14 Sessions in Revised Road to Yaoundé (3 February 2026)

A. Plenary sessions (all Ministers together)

Session title	Nature of session	Date	Time	Duration
Opening Session	Ceremonial and procedural plenary	Thu 26 Mar	10h00–13h00	3 hours
WTO Reform Transparency Plenary Session	Reporting plenary	Fri 27 Mar	19h30	≈60–90 mins
Update on Dispute Settlement Reform by the DSB Chair	Informational plenary	Sat 28 Mar	09h00–09h30	30 minutes
Ministerial Session on Fisheries Subsidies	Substantive ministerial plenary	Sat 28 Mar	09h30–10h30	1 hour
Ministerial Session on Incorporation of IFDA	Substantive ministerial plenary (plurilateral)	Sat 28 Mar	10h30–12h00	1.5 hours
Ministerial Session on E-commerce Work Programme and Moratorium	Substantive ministerial plenary	Sat 28 Mar	14h00–15h30	1.5 hours
Ministerial Session on Agriculture	Substantive ministerial plenary	Sat 28 Mar	15h30–18h00	2.5 hours
Ministerial Session on Development including LDC issues	Substantive ministerial plenary	Sat 28 Mar	18h00–20h00	2 hours
Informal Heads of Delegation Meeting	Informal plenary coordination	Sun 29 Mar	09h00–12h00	3 hours
Formal Closing Session	Procedural plenary	Sun 29 Mar	12h00–13h00	1 hour

B. Breakout sessions (parallel ministerial groups)

Session title	Nature of session	Date	Time	Duration
Ministerial Conversation on Foundational Issues on WTO, including its principles	WTO reform breakout (6 parallel groups)	Thu 26 Mar	15h00–18h00	3 hours
WTO Reform Breakout Session on Decision-making and past mandates	WTO reform breakout (6 parallel groups)	Fri 27 Mar	10h00–12h00	2 hours
WTO Reform Breakout Session on Development and S&DT	WTO reform breakout (6 parallel groups)	Fri 27 Mar	14h00–16h00	2 hours
WTO Reform Breakout Session on Level-playing-field issues	WTO reform breakout (6 parallel groups)	Fri 27 Mar	16h30–18h30	2 hours