

What should Africa's trade strategy be?

The outcome of the 14th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Yaoundé, Cameroon, which concluded on March 30, has once again laid bare the structural weaknesses of the multilateral trading system. Rather than delivering substantive outcomes on Africa's long-standing development concerns and demands, the conference ended in deadlock, reinforcing growing questions about the WTO's ability to deliver concrete, binding outcomes on issues central to the continent's development agenda and quest for structural economic transformation.

After four days of negotiations, ministers were only able to adopt three limited decisions on integrating small economies into the multilateral trading system, a political decision taking note of work done on special and differential treatment in standards-related measures and a political decision to continue the fisheries subsidies negotiations. Meanwhile, the most critical is-

tially making the process more complex and prolonged.

At Yaoundé, the failure to renew the WTO's long-standing moratorium on customs duties for electronic transmissions exposed deep divisions over digital trade rules and highlighted risks for developing regions. While some developed countries led by the US pushed for longer or permanent extensions, others resisted, arguing that the moratorium limits the ability of developing countries to generate revenue and maintain policy space for digital transformation.

Agriculture, a central pillar for African economies, once again saw no meaningful progress. Negotiations stalled, leaving unresolved critical issues such as domestic support, market access, public stockholding for food security, and special safeguard mechanisms. The continued lack of outcomes underscores a longstanding imbalance in the trading system.

Africa's trade strategy must therefore evolve. Defending key interests within the WTO remains essential, particularly in areas such as agriculture, food security, and development flexibilities. At the same time, there is a need to deepen regional integration and strengthen alternative platforms that can deliver tangible outcomes.

At the same time, the conference brought renewed focus to the growing role of plurilateral agreements, particularly the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement. Supported by over 120 members, proponents are seeking to integrate this agreement into the WTO framework despite the absence of full consensus, raising concerns about fragmentation within the system.

For African countries, this trend presents a complex challenge. While plurilateral initiatives may offer opportunities, they also carry risks of constraining domestic policy space and introducing obligations that may not align with development priorities. Existing continental frameworks, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area, provide an alternative basis for shaping trade and investment rules in line with Africa's needs.

Collectively, these developments point to a multilateral trading system under strain. Continued engagement within the WTO remains essential, but reliance on it alone is no longer sufficient to advance Africa's development objectives.

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sues, including WTO reform and the Least Developed Countries package, were deferred to Geneva for further discussion. This outcome reinforces a long-standing trend in which difficult decisions are postponed, leaving core development concerns unresolved.

In the aftermath of the deadlock, the 166 WTO members opted to move negotiations back to Geneva in an attempt to salvage progress. However, the draft texts developed in Yaoundé, including those on WTO Reform, and the two moratoria on customs duties on electronic transmissions and TRIPS non-violation and situation complaints carry no binding legal status. Their uncertain standing means that members may reopen negotiations or introduce new proposals, poten-

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