

Why AU meeting for trade ministers matters

On 25–26 February 2026, African Ministers responsible for trade will gather in Maputo, Republic of Mozambique, under the African Union (AU) framework. This meeting comes just weeks before the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), scheduled for March 2026 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

With global trade discussions poised to influence Africa's development trajectory, the Maputo gathering provides a critical platform for African countries to coordinate positions, align national and regional strategies, and present a unified stance on issues of strategic importance.

MC14 will address several complex and interrelated agendas, including comprehensive discussions on WTO reform and ongoing plurilateral initiatives. Reform discussions will focus on institutional strengthening, dispute settlement, the operationalisation of Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT), and striking a balance between development priorities and procedural efficiency. Plurilateral negotiations are expected to feature prominently, particularly the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) and the temporary moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions, alongside broader debates on e-commerce, digital trade rules and the trade-related aspects of Artificial Intelligence.

The interests of powerful economies are particularly influential in these negotiations, as they seek commitments that secure digital market advantages, protect their global technology firms, and limit the regulatory flexibility of developing countries. The African Group has consistently advocated for outcomes that safeguard Africa's development interests, defending agriculture and food security, strengthening S&DT provisions, and preserving policy space for industrialisation, digital transformation, and economic diversification.

The Group has also emphasised the importance of consensus-based decision-making, cautioning against attempts to integrate

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Strategy



plurilateral outcomes into the WTO framework without full multilateral approval, a strategy increasingly advanced by some developed economies that risks constraining Africa's policy autonomy and its ability to pursue domestic development priorities.

The current global trading system is marked by growing asymmetries. While advanced economies expand the use of industrial policy instruments including subsidies, strategic procurement, local content requirements, and regulatory measures to strengthen competitiveness in sectors such as renewable energy, digital technologies, and advanced manufacturing, developing countries, including African states, face pressure to adopt restrictive disciplines that limit similar interventions.

For Africa, this raises a fundamental question: will emerging global trade rules expand or constrain the continent's development options? Many African economies remain heavily dependent on primary commodity exports, with limited diversification and weak manufacturing capacity. Infrastructure gaps, high trade costs, technological deficits, and vulnerability to external shocks continue to inhibit competitiveness. Agriculture, which employs the majority of Africa's population, remains particularly affected by trade-distorting domestic support measures in developed countries. Without meaningful reform of global agricultural rules, African countries' efforts to modernise agriculture, strengthen food security, and increase value addition will continue to be constrained.

Against this backdrop, the Maputo meet-

ing is strategically vital. It provides African Ministers with the opportunity to develop collective positions that reaffirm agriculture and food security as central pillars of the development agenda, defend and strengthen S&DT as a non-negotiable element of fairness in the multilateral system, safeguard policy space for industrialisation and digital transformation, and ensure coherence between AfCFTA implementation, national strategies, and WTO outcomes.

The African Union and the African Group have historically pushed for reforms that reflect Africa's development priorities. Key achievements include coordinated positions on agriculture subsidies, public stockholding for food security, and resistance to the forced multilateralization of plurilateral agreements such as IFD.

These efforts demonstrate that speaking with one voice amplifies Africa's influence in global trade negotiations and ensures that development considerations remain central. MC14, however, presents additional challenges. Some developed countries are actively shaping rule-making on subsidies, e-commerce, and investment facilitation to reinforce their strategic advantages in digital markets, advanced manufacturing, and global value chains, often in ways that could limit Africa's industrial policy options.

Ministers in Maputo must therefore assess these proposals critically, ensuring that any commitments preserve policy space for domestic and regional development agendas, and support the effective implementation of Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA framework.

The upcoming Maputo meeting is far more than a routine preparatory session; it is a defining moment for Africa. By coordinating positions across Member States, integrating REC perspectives, and articulating clear priorities, the continent can ensure that global trade negotiations serve the interests of all countries, not only the most powerful.

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