

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report



Session I: Africa’s development mandate and WTO reform: priorities and prospects

This session offered a clear diagnosis of the WTO’s current strain, locating the “crisis” less in a single failure than in weaknesses across the organization’s three core functions: negotiations, the day-to-day administration and operation of existing agreements, and dispute settlement. Speakers consistently returned to the point that these functions are mutually reinforcing; when negotiations stall, the system leans more heavily on adjudication and workarounds, and when dispute settlement is contested or slow, members are more likely to manage tensions unilaterally, further weakening confidence in agreed disciplines.

A major systemic stress test identified was the expanding use of national security justifications in trade policy. The discussion emphasized that the increased reliance on “security” rationales, especially in the period shaped by U.S. policy shifts from the late 2010s onward has triggered retaliatory cycles and responses that do not consistently align with WTO rules. The result is a widening gap between formal commitments and actual practice, where “security” becomes a gateway for measures that would otherwise face higher thresholds of justification, contributing to broader departures from multilateral disciplines.

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

Relatedly, participants warned that the erosion of MFN and non-discrimination is no longer episodic but risks becoming normalized. The system's predictability depends on the premise that similarly situated trading partners receive equal treatment, and the discussion suggested this expectation is increasingly under pressure. As more policy choices become conditional, shaped by geopolitical alignment, perceived security risks, or industrial policy priorities, the WTO's baseline promise of stable and uniform treatment becomes harder for governments and firms to rely on.

From an Africa-focused perspective, the AfCFTA was presented as a strategically important platform for both development and external negotiation. The discussion highlighted the continent's persistently low levels of intra-African trade and treated AfCFTA's full implementation as a pathway to deepen regional commerce, build production linkages, and consolidate bargaining power. Once operationalized at scale, AfCFTA was framed as capable of enabling Africa to speak more coherently and with greater weight in multilateral negotiations, shifting from fragmented national interventions to a more collective articulation of priorities.

On Special and Differential Treatment, the conversation pressed for realism while defending the enduring relevance of development flexibilities. The discussion distinguished the LDC regime as a specific and important category, while reframing broader S&DT debates as fundamentally about the pace and sequencing of convergence, shared rules, but differentiated timelines and capacities. At the same time, speakers underscored the political-economy tension: developed economies continue to maintain high protection in sensitive sectors, including areas tied to agriculture and labor-intensive production, which sustains contestation over what "fairness" and "reciprocity" should mean in practice.

The discussion also pointed to climate and services as areas where African strategy should intensify. On climate, the emphasis was that Africa's central challenge is adaptation, financing, resilience, and food-security-linked vulnerabilities, rather than a framing that focuses only on mitigation responsibilities. On services and the digital economy, the conversation cautioned that services are often undercounted or obscured in trade statistics and therefore under-prioritized in policy, despite becoming increasingly central as economies evolve. A stronger focus on services was presented as a practical growth pathway and a necessary component of future-facing trade strategy.

Governance questions featured prominently, particularly the constraints created by consensus decision-making. The discussion noted that consensus can enable legitimacy but also creates a structural veto problem, where a single member can block outcomes even when broad agreement exists. Speakers called for more creative thinking about decision-making constraints, whether through procedural innovation, variable geometry, or other mechanisms, to prevent paralysis while maintaining confidence among members.

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

From the private-sector-oriented interventions, the event captured how recent volatility is translating into real compliance and planning burdens for firms. The last year was described as unusually disruptive for business, shaped by uncertainty over preference schemes (including major preference arrangements relevant to Africa), shifting rules of origin approaches, rising barriers in services trade, expanding data localization requirements, and a wider “economic security” agenda that is reshaping subsidies and industrial policy. The practical message was that firms experience these shifts as direct cost increases and heightened unpredictability in market access.

At the same time, the discussion stressed that the WTO still matters to business even when firms do not explicitly reference it. A significant share of global trade continues to operate on WTO baseline rules, and many companies benefit from those disciplines as an assumed operating environment, through predictable customs treatment, MFN tariff baselines, and shared minimum standards, without necessarily labeling them as “WTO rules.” This observation reinforced the broader point that systemic weakening of WTO disciplines has downstream effects that businesses feel as friction, delay, or additional cost, even if the causal chain is not always visible.

A further business concern raised was the growing “spaghetti-bowl” problem: multiple overlapping FTAs and regulatory regimes impose high administrative and compliance costs. The event noted that preferential rules of origin, in particular, can be expensive to administer, and that navigating multiple, and sometimes conflicting data governance regimes is becoming an added layer of complexity. This was framed as a competitiveness issue, especially for smaller firms and for suppliers trying to integrate into regional and global value chains without large compliance budgets.

In terms of expectations for MC14, the business-oriented perspective emphasized that firms prioritize outcomes over negotiating postures. The key question for companies is whether MC14 will reduce cost, uncertainty, or procedural delay. The discussion argued that practical reforms often seen as unglamorous compared to headline political debates can be decisive for firms’ survival and growth. It also highlighted a political constraint: WTO reform frequently sits low on ministerial priority lists unless it can be tied to tangible economic wins or linked to issues ministers already prioritize, with sustainability and digital themes identified as more politically salient entry points.

From the AfCFTA Secretariat’s perspective, AfCFTA was positioned not only as a continental market project but as a development and negotiation platform designed to support economic transformation with sustainability in view. The intervention reinforced that, from a business standpoint, the value of AfCFTA will be judged by whether it improves facilitation and lowers transaction costs. Practically, AfCFTA was presented as offering a unified market, greater

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

harmonization of rules, and a stronger basis for coherence in Africa's external trade posture, turning political momentum and ratification progress into negotiating strength.

A notable strategic proposal was that Africa should use AfCFTA's negotiated disciplines as a test bed for global positioning. Rather than continually rebuilding proposals from scratch in multilateral settings, the argument was to draw from AfCFTA's rules, experience, and emerging institutional practice to craft more grounded, internally consistent negotiating positions for the WTO context. This would also help align continental implementation with external advocacy, reducing the gap between what Africa argues for internationally and what it operationalizes regionally.

On dispute settlement, the AfCFTA perspective highlighted the need for accessibility, speed, and cost-effectiveness. WTO dispute settlement was characterized as costly and slow, with politicization risks; AfCFTA's developing system was presented as being designed with an operational protocol, an appellate structure, and stronger emphasis on consultations, mediation, and facilitated settlement to reduce cost and time barriers. The aim, as described, is to make dispute settlement usable for a broader range of members and disputes, supporting compliance and credibility without replicating the same bottlenecks.

A strong recurring theme was that implementation is as important as rulemaking. The intervention emphasized that many rules already exist, but practical barriers, domestic reforms, border processes, institutional capacity, and business enablement, often prevent firms from trading regionally. When cross-border trade is difficult, businesses default to importing from outside the continent even where African supply exists, undermining the very logic of regional integration. This framing placed enforcement, facilitation, and domestic coordination at the center of AfCFTA's success.

On critical minerals and regional value chains, the AfCFTA intervention argued that Africa's opportunity lies in coordinated regional industrial strategies rather than purely national approaches. For sectors such as EV battery inputs, the discussion suggested that no single country can easily build the full chain alone; regional coordination is needed to support value addition, reduce fragmentation, and shift away from a pattern of exporting raw materials and re-importing finished goods. This was linked to green industrialization objectives and to the need for integrated infrastructure, standards, and investment frameworks.

The Enhanced Integrated Framework contribution connected WTO reform debates to delivery mechanisms for development outcomes, positioning trade capacity building and Aid for Trade as essential complements to rule-based discussions. The intervention recalled the MC10-era context as a reference point for mobilizing resources, and emphasized measurable, operational results, from facilitated export transactions across African LDCs to support for accession-

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

related reforms, including practical systems and “hardware” that enable countries to actually use market access opportunities.

Concrete examples illustrated how targeted interventions can unlock trade: cross-border market centers, metrology laboratory support, airport cargo infrastructure, and regional initiatives that can catalyze additional partner and private-sector financing. The later discussion focused on how Aid for Trade can help build bankable project pipelines for industrialization, through feasibility studies, project preparation grants, and links to impact investors and climate finance, especially in contexts such as SEZs or agri-economic zone investments and energy feasibility work. The broader point was that industrial transformation around critical minerals and new value chains requires investment structuring and capacity building, not only new trade rules.

Finally, the Geneva “read-out” on reform emphasized that WTO reform is being treated as an ongoing process with multiple issue clusters under discussion, including development and “level playing field” debates. The reporting stressed that African and LDC positions in Geneva continue to center inclusivity, equity, meaningful S&DT implementation, capacity, fairness, and policy space as core guideposts for reform. It also highlighted that trade–climate and sustainability issues are increasingly embedded in reform discussions, with African/LDC perspectives emphasizing that climate-related trade measures should avoid protectionist effects and should support green industrialization, adaptation, and food security priorities.

The discussion also mapped a broader “dialogue architecture” emerging on trade and climate, including parallel processes and coalitions outside the WTO alongside structured discussions within it. Strategically, the point was that progress often depends on a coalition of champions operating at multiple levels, ministers, ambassadors, and technical experts, supported by civil society, think tanks, and regional organizations. Resource constraints were highlighted as a structural disadvantage for smaller delegations, which can affect sustained engagement and influence in Geneva-based processes. A further strategic warning was that while S&DT and agriculture remain central, some members exhibit fatigue; Africa’s challenge is to keep development priorities visible while framing them in ways that also speak to system stability and shared economic opportunity. In that context, MC14 was treated as a tactical opening, particularly around high-level climate-related moments adjacent to the ministerial, to lock in development-centered trade–climate cooperation and reinforce Africa’s priorities in a politically resonant way.

Session II: Trade, climate and sustainable development: Seizing opportunities, overcoming obstacles

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

The discussion cautioned against treating carbon pricing as a universal template that can simply be transplanted across economies. The key warning was that one-size-fits-all approaches risk producing unintended consequences, especially for developing economies where household energy costs, informal markets, and limited compensatory fiscal tools can make price-based measures regressive. The thrust of the intervention was that carbon pricing design must be targeted and explicitly pro-poor, while also accounting for competitiveness and structural constraints. In other words, the policy question is not whether carbon pricing “works” in theory, but whether the design choices, sector coverage, exemptions, sequencing, and use of revenues, fit the distributional realities of African economies and avoid undermining industrial ambition.

A set of practical action points was implied for follow-up and is directly usable for a meeting report. First, participants pointed to an AfCFTA/AGII track that should produce a short, operational “ask package” on climate-related trade measures framing Africa’s priorities in terms of financing needs, infrastructure requirements, and a clear negotiation posture on major external measures and standard-setting issues such as CBAM, shipping decarbonisation, and evolving product standards. The emphasis here was to convert broad principles into a concise and usable set of talking points and priorities that can be deployed consistently across forums, while keeping finance and implementation constraints at the center.

Second, the session highlighted the need for a stronger coordination mechanism effectively a “Team Africa” approach to reduce fragmentation in external engagement. The point was that Africa’s influence is weakened when countries attend critical fora with uncoordinated national positions, particularly in spaces where trade, climate, and technical regulation intersect, such as maritime decarbonisation discussions and other standards-setting environments. The implied recommendation was to institutionalise pre-briefs, shared lines, and role allocation across delegations so that Africa shows up with coherence, avoids talking past itself, and can negotiate from a position of collective clarity.

Third, the conversation implied the value of developing a practical policy toolkit on carbon pricing that is explicitly designed to avoid regressive impacts while supporting competitiveness. Rather than pushing blanket harmonisation, the session leaned toward differentiated, sector-specific or tiered approaches that can reflect varying levels of readiness, exposure to trade competition, and social vulnerability. This action point is as much about political feasibility as it is about economics: designing measures that protect low-income households and sensitive sectors, while still creating credible pathways for emissions reduction and investment mobilisation.

Fourth, the session flagged a rules/implementation coherence issue that has both internal and external strategic implications: how AfCFTA treats goods produced in SEZs for purposes of rules of origin and market access. The concern was that unresolved or inconsistent approaches to SEZ-origin treatment can create internal fragmentation within Africa, which then

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

undermines external credibility and negotiating leverage. The implied follow-up is to accelerate technical work and shared policy positions so that AfCFTA's internal disciplines do not inadvertently weaken Africa's ability to argue for fair treatment and policy space in global trade–climate discussions.

Investment emerged as the practical hinge connecting trade, climate, and development outcomes, with a strong emphasis that these policy tracks should be treated as a single, integrated package rather than pursued in parallel. The discussion framed investment mobilisation as the mechanism through which climate ambition becomes implementable and development outcomes become bankable, and it stressed that trade strategy must be designed to actively support investment flows into resilience, productive capacity, and transition-relevant sectors.

A clear competitiveness and “bottom line” lens ran through the intervention, underscoring that firms and investors respond primarily to incentives, risk allocation, and credible returns—not simply to climate targets or normative commitments. The session highlighted that governments do not need to wait for multilateral outcomes before acting, because there are immediate domestic levers that can catalyse investment, particularly through public procurement choices and targeted policy reforms that can direct capital toward climate-resilience and transition priorities. This was linked to a wider “green squeeze” reality in which climate shocks are intensifying while fiscal space is tightening, and where rising debt service burdens make delayed action more costly. In that context, investment mobilisation was presented as central to resilience, macroeconomic stability, and retaining economic agency, rather than as an optional add-on.

The discussion then moved from diagnosis to the operational constraints of capital mobilisation, with a particular focus on the “pipeline and bankability” problem. The core point was that the binding constraint is often not the absence of capital, but a shortage of investment-ready projects that meet financing thresholds, revealing a project preparation gap that prevents funds from flowing at scale. The session urged that strategy should start from Africa's competitive and comparative advantages, building investable propositions around areas of strength rather than reacting primarily to external rules or market pressures.

A further practical message was that transition staging matters: financing structures and instruments must align with where a country or sector actually sits on the transition pathway, rather than relying on generic models that may not fit local conditions. The intervention pointed to enabling tools that can help unlock finance, including certification platforms that improve credibility and reduce transaction costs, and approaches to recycle revenues generated through transition-linked measures back into domestic and regional investment, so that the transition builds a self-reinforcing financing base. Overall, the emphasis was on shifting quickly toward

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

implementable pathways that convert high-level objectives into credible, investable programmes.

Session III: Digital trade synergies: Aligning AfCFTA and WTO negotiations for Africa's digital future

The discussion framed digital trade as both an economic modernization agenda and an inclusion agenda, emphasizing the need to build an open, trusted, and sustainable digital economy that broadens participation, especially for SMEs, youth entrepreneurs, and women-led firms. A central observation was that many trade systems remain anchored in “paper-era” processes, and that digitisation offers a practical route to reducing the time and cost of cross-border trade while improving security and resilience. Digitisation was repeatedly positioned not as a peripheral reform, but as a competitiveness and facilitation measure that can simplify compliance, strengthen risk management, and make regional trade more accessible to smaller firms.

A strong theme was the need to connect continental digital trade efforts with global governance requirements. Progress under the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol was treated as a major step toward a coherent African framework, but the discussion stressed that the value of that framework will depend on compatibility with the wider international system. Participants returned to interoperability as a make-or-break issue: trusted digital systems, harmonised processes, and seamless (but safeguarded) data flows are necessary for African traders and service suppliers to operate across borders without being trapped in fragmented or incompatible regimes. The conversation highlighted that fragmentation across countries' data rules, standards, and compliance requirements raises transaction costs and can lock smaller firms out of cross-border digital commerce.

The WTO moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions was treated as a major policy decision point at MC14 and was discussed as foundational to predictability in the digital economy. The discussion argued that renewal is important for maintaining access to essential digital inputs and services that now underpin commerce, learning, and operational continuity, including digital content, training services, and routine software updates and security patches. Participants warned that ending the moratorium could raise costs for firms and consumers, disrupt digital supply chains, and deepen fragmentation at a moment when many countries are still building the legal and technical foundations for digital trade.

The conversation also focused heavily on implementation realities. It was emphasized that adopting protocols and policies is only the beginning; delivery requires a digitally capable population, institutional coordination across ministries and agencies, and sustained engagement with the private sector. Participants noted that awareness and practical

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

understanding of digital trade rules and opportunities remains limited among businesses, including SMEs, and that successful implementation will depend on deliberate socialisation, training, and ongoing consultation beyond policy circles. The discussion linked this to the broader point that digital trade outcomes depend on whether businesses can actually use the systems through practical onboarding, clear guidance, and predictable compliance pathways.

Payments and cross-border settlement systems were repeatedly identified as crucial enablers. The discussion acknowledged growing momentum on regional and continental payment “rails,” but also flagged constraints that arise when payment architectures are overly centralised or structured in ways that limit innovation and interoperability. The point was not simply that payments must be digital, but that systems must enable broad participation, including the ability for fintech solutions to connect and scale in ways that reduce cost and widen access for firms and consumers.

Another key thread reframed “digital trade” beyond e-commerce platforms to include the power dynamics of standards, compliance, and governance rules that determine who can participate in digital markets. The digital divide was treated as a concrete trade barrier: device affordability, connectivity, and usability directly shape participation in cross-border digital transactions. Trust frameworks, especially authentication, secure identity, and reliable verification, were presented as essential for scale. Participants also stressed the importance of language and local usability, arguing that digital systems and emerging tools such as AI must function in the languages people actually use if inclusion is to be meaningful rather than symbolic.

The discussion highlighted experimentation and learning-by-doing as practical pathways to scale. Regulatory sandboxes and controlled cross-border pilots were presented as useful mechanisms to test solutions, build confidence among regulators, and refine rules before wide adoption. This was tied to the broader need for coordinated approaches under AfCFTA so that innovation does not remain isolated within national borders and so that workable models can be replicated across jurisdictions.

A recurring constraint identified was the gap in services trade readiness. Participants stressed that digital trade relies heavily on services, telecoms, finance, logistics, professional services, and data-driven services, and that weaknesses in services regulation, market institutions, and skills can limit the gains from digital protocols. The discussion therefore positioned services readiness and domestic regulatory capability as core building blocks for the digital trade agenda, not secondary considerations.

The infrastructure gap was repeatedly underscored as a binding constraint. Beyond physical connectivity, the discussion highlighted data infrastructure, networks, skills, and institutional capacity as critical to ensuring digital trade frameworks translate into real economic outcomes.

Nairobi to Yaoundé Roundtable: Securing Africa's trade and development future at MC14.

5th December 2025

A Comprehensive Report

The point was that protocol adoption must be matched with targeted investments and delivery plans; otherwise, commitments remain aspirational and unevenly usable across countries and firms.

Legal interoperability emerged as another decisive issue. The discussion noted that even where technology exists, contradictory or outdated laws can block adoption of electronic trade documents, digital originals, e-signatures, and paperless transactions. Harmonisation of key data fields and alignment across trade documentation, trade finance processes, and release/clearance systems were described as essential to unlock the full cost reductions of paperless trade. Real-world pilots were cited to reinforce that significant savings are achievable when digital processes are legally recognised and interoperable across borders.

Digital Public Infrastructure was repeatedly framed as the underlying architecture for digital trade, rather than “supporting infrastructure.” Identity systems were highlighted as foundational transaction enablers, alongside payments systems and connectivity. The discussion treated DPI as the practical means through which AfCFTA digital trade commitments can be operationalised at scale, and as the bridge between African priorities and global digital governance expectations.

Finally, the discussion explored the tension around the moratorium between cost reduction and revenue concerns. While the dominant view was that ending the moratorium now would be economically damaging, particularly for participation and affordability, participants acknowledged that some members raise concerns about foregone tariff revenue. A key point was that revenue objectives may be better pursued through alternative domestic tax tools such as consumption taxes, corporate income taxes, or digital services taxes rather than customs duties on electronic transmissions. At the same time, the discussion called for deeper analysis of revenue implications and recognised that readiness for new taxation approaches varies, which makes sequencing and capacity-building important.

Overall, the session converged on several outcomes: implementation is the real test, and protocols must translate into usable systems across payments, identity, customs, logistics, and trust frameworks. Interoperability and harmonization across laws, data fields, licensing, signatures, and consumer standards were repeatedly identified as the make-or-break issues. Digital Public Infrastructure was treated as the trade architecture for the digital economy, not an optional add-on. The discussion also underscored the need for a clearer, coordinated African stance that links AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol priorities with WTO digital and e-commerce negotiations, including a coherent approach to the moratorium debate.