

The 14th Ministerial Conference of the WTO and the outstanding mandates on agriculture: Key issues for developing countries

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The World Trade Organization (WTO)'s 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) is going to take place in Yaounde, Cameroon, at the end of March. As usual, agriculture features among the host of issues on the table.

Given the vital importance of agriculture in developing countries, they have a critical stake in the negotiations under the WTO. Since the inception of the WTO, developing countries have been trying to redress the inequitable framework embodied in the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). This long engagement has resulted in advanced negotiations on key issues in their interest, such as domestic support (DS), public stockholding (PSH), Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM) and cotton. Mandates on PSH, SSM and cotton were specifically reaffirmed in the WTO's 10th Ministerial Conference in Nairobi in 2015. However, the 11th, 12th and 13th Ministerials did not reach major outcomes on agriculture. Subsequently, the negotiations got derailed by the mayhem created in the global trading system as WTO Members were left grappling with volatile US trade policies in 2025.

Ahead of MC14, several proposals were submitted to either the WTO Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoA-SS) or the WTO General Council between December 2025 and March 2026. These include proposals by Jamaica; the African Group; Brazil; Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay; the Group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs); the Sectoral Initiative in Favour of Cotton (C-4) and Côte d'Ivoire; Indonesia; Argentina; and, most recently, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Switzerland and Ukraine on 6 March. A Room Document on a possible MC14 decision was also submitted at the end of January 2026 by the African Group. Finally, a CoA-SS Chair's text, which attempts to present a consolidated work plan post MC14, was issued on 27 February, followed by a revised version on 5 March.

Not surprisingly, most of the current submissions suggest deferral of any substantive outcome to MC15 and recommend a path forward in this direction. There seems to be a broad understanding among most, if not

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all, Members that a Ministerial Decision/Declaration oriented more towards a broad process or a set of broad principles underpinning the agriculture work programme on the road to MC15 is the only option at this point. In lieu of an MC14 decision that delivers clear and substantive outcomes, the process and principles underpinning further work on agriculture become critically important for developing countries and LDCs as they have a major stake in the sector. However, charting the process forward also requires an understanding of the content of the issues on the table.

The analysis below provides a developing-country perspective of the current agriculture negotiations from two approaches: first, a summary of key issues that have been negotiated/discussed in recent times; and, second, a quick assessment of and key points from some of the latest submissions and the CoA-SS Chair's text.

A) Key issues on the table and implications for developing countries

Developing countries' longtime demand that domestic support (subsidy) rules be equitably redesigned, for example, by removing extra entitlements of developed countries, has remained unaddressed. Further, recent proposals on PSH, SSM and cotton-related issues, including domestic cotton subsidies, have not yielded concrete results in spite of long-outstanding mandates which were reaffirmed multiple times. At the same time, issues of interest to farm-exporting and developed Members such as market access and removal of export restrictions have been gaining ground. While developing countries and LDCs have repeatedly talked about resolving the languishing priority issues first, there is a continuous push to address "all pillars" of the negotiations, placing them on par. While "food security" has been the common demand of most developing countries and LDCs, this is increasingly undermined or subsumed by two separate but somewhat overlapping approaches forwarded by some farm-exporting and developed Members. First, a "reform" agenda framed as deep market liberalisation and possibly incorporating elements of sustainability, and second, "new approaches" that suggest starting afresh and ignoring past mandates.

Amid this background, this briefing takes stock of some of the key issues on the table.

1. Permanent solution on public stockholding (PSH): Subsidies given to producers through administered price support on purchases for public food programmes are seen to be trade-distorting by AoA rules (Footnote 5, Annex 2 of the AoA). These are to be limited within the 10% *de minimis* limit for developing countries. The quantum of subsidy is calculated on the basis of a fixed and outdated 1986–88 external reference price (ERP), which overestimates the subsidy. In addition, the calculation is based on "eligible production", which is not the actual quantity procured at the administered price that receives the subsidy but the entire production eligible to receive such a subsidy, thus again inflating the subsidy estimate.

It is important to remember that PSH programmes are in place across several developing countries and LDCs, including Egypt, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Morocco, Pakistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to support the needs of both consumers and farmers (through market price support given through an administered price).¹ These programmes are vitally important to ensure continuity of agricultural production, growth, incomes, livelihoods, price stabilisation and national food security. Some of these countries are breaching the irrational limit set by the AoA rules and therefore many developing countries together demanded in 2013 that these subsidies be allowed or that the rules be updated.

The Bali Ministerial Decision of 2013 (WTO document WT/MIN(13)/38–WT/L/913) and the General Council Decision WT/L/939 provided an interim "Peace Clause" under which dispute cases will not be brought against developing countries and LDCs for market price support given on traditional staple crops for PSH programmes existing before 2013 even if it breaches the relevant support limit. However, this provision was riddled with difficult conditionalities relating to notifications and safeguards. But at least there was an agreement, later reaffirmed by the 2015 Nairobi Ministerial Decision (WT/MIN(15)/44–WT/L/979), to reach a permanent solution by 2017.

However, given consistent opposition by developed countries, particularly the US, several deadlines have since come and gone. In spite of several proposals by the G33 and the African Group, including a 2022 joint proposal from 80 countries (JOB/AG/229, G33, African Group and ACP Group), the permanent solution has still not been agreed. Further, attempts have been made to link it to the overall disciplines on domestic support.

As MC14 approaches, there are proposals by the African Group, the LDC Group and Indonesia that draw attention to this issue, although it is glaringly absent in the submissions by Jamaica, Brazil and Argentina. However, it is unlikely that an outcome in this area will be reached at MC14. In fact, even a reaffirmation of the outstanding mandate may not find a place in the MC14 declaration on agriculture.

2. The Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM): Developing countries and LDCs have for long been advocating a mechanism that will allow them to raise import duties in order to protect against a sudden surge in agricultural imports. Such surges have adversely affected many developing countries' agriculture sectors and farmers' livelihoods by crashing domestic prices, creating uncertainties and volatilities in production and prices. This has also had long-term implications on the steady development of the agriculture sector in many countries. Meanwhile, it is also to be noted that the developed countries along with a handful of developing countries already have access to a Special Agricultural Safeguard (SSG) under Article 5 of the AoA.

In spite of the guidance in the 2008 Draft Modalities text (TN/AG/W/4/Rev.4) and a renewed mandate in Nairobi (WT/MIN(15)/43–WT/L/978), and even after several recent proposals by the African Group (JOB/AG/205/Rev.2, 2023) and the G33 (JOB/AG/49, 2021), there is no progress on this issue.

The US has been trying to link an SSM to further market access (import concessions). This is also reflected in the recent proposal submitted ahead of MC14 by the Mercosur group (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, JOB/AG/255/Rev.1, 5 December 2025), supported by a separate proposal from Brazil (JOB/AG/271, 5 December 2025). The Mercosur proposal seeks to severely limit the scope of the remedy under the SSM and makes the SSM relevant only if Members first cut their import tariffs and provide market access. On the other hand, proposals by Indonesia and the LDC Group reaffirm the demand for an effective SSM for developing countries. However, it seems clear that there will not be any outcome on an SSM at MC14, and again, even a reaffirmation of the mandate will likely not feature in the MC14 declaration on agriculture.

3. Cotton: Domestic subsidies given by developed countries such as the US have for long impacted livelihoods of cotton farmers in several developing countries and LDCs, most notably in the Cotton-4 (C-4) African cotton-producing countries of Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali. The Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration (WT/MIN(05)/DEC), the Bali Cotton Ministerial Decision (WT/MIN(13)/41–WT/L/916) and the subsequent Nairobi Cotton Ministerial Decision (WT/MIN(15)/46–WT/L/981) provide clear mandates on this issue. However, in spite of several proposals by the C-4 countries, this issue is not yet addressed.

The C-4 and Côte d'Ivoire had again submitted a proposal (WT/MIN(26)/1, TN/AG/GEN/56, TN/AG/SCC/GEN/27, 4 December 2025) demanding an outcome at MC14 but it did not make any progress. There was also the possibility that cotton-producing countries would have had to make sacrifices in other areas to secure this outcome or that this issue would be used to divide developing countries and LDCs at MC14. The Chair's text also fails to mention this issue, much to the chagrin of the C-4 and Côte d'Ivoire.

4. Domestic support disciplines: The original promise of the AoA was to discipline the inequities in domestic support entitlements and integrate special and differential treatment (S&DT) for developing countries and LDCs. But it remains unfulfilled in spite of continued demands by developing countries. Proposals ahead of MC13 by the African Group (JOB/AG/242/Rev.1) included disciplines on Aggregate Measurement of Support (AMS) entitlements, trade-distorting direct payments under the Green Box and the Blue Box. India had also submitted a proposal on AMS entitlements (JOB/AG/216/Rev.1).

But since MC12, more divergent approaches had surfaced from Costa Rica (JOB/AG/243), supported by the Cairns Group (excluding Indonesia, Peru and South Africa), which target the total absolute level of subsidies. This includes the AMS, the Blue Box, *de minimis*, as well as the Development Box subsidies allowed under S&DT. The proposed cuts on all subsidies together, rather than on the most inequitable components, impose higher cuts on developing countries and LDCs² (unless specifically exempted) and limit LDCs' policy space to increase subsidies even if they are exempted. This proposal also subsumes PSH and suggests it will be addressed as part of the overall disciplines on domestic support. Efforts between the African Group and the Cairns Group to arrive at a consolidated document have collapsed due to major disagreements.

Ahead of MC14, proposals by the African Group, the LDC Group, the C-4 and Côte d'Ivoire, and Brazil specifically raise the issue of domestic support. While the first few focus on cuts by developed countries and the integration of S&DT as a core principle, the approach of Brazil has been criticised for treating all subsidies (even those provided by developing countries under S&DT) on par, which is reflective of the Cairns Group position. It is unlikely that MC14 will yield any concrete outcome on domestic support either.

5. Disciplines on export restrictions: Article XI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) bans the use of export restrictions to ensure free trade flows. However, in the context of agriculture, Article XI.2.a balances this general obligation by allowing export restrictions in the case of a domestic food crisis. This has been an important tool for developing countries. Export restriction is not an ideal policy tool since it affects more vulnerable countries such as net food-importing developing countries (NFIDCs) and LDCs (as expressed in proposal JOB/AG/251 submitted by the LDC Group in 2023). However, it remains an emergency response tool used by both developed and developing countries to ensure domestic food security.

It is important to recall the MC12 decision exempting World Food Programme (WFP) food purchases from export prohibitions or restrictions (WT/MIN(22)/29–WT/L/1140). The decision, while noble in its stated objective, has received criticism that this is a non-issue and actually opens the door to a broader move towards imposing further constraints on the Article XI.2.a flexibility. Proposals suggesting higher transparency and notification requirements in the name of streamlining its application have been advanced for some time (for example, 2023 proposals from the UK (JOB/AG/250) and Japan (JOB/AG/252)). Additional rules for disciplining export restrictions may be forthcoming as well.

It is not clear whether the push behind limiting or banning export restrictions stems simply from a belief in unrestricted trade; is a way to ensure unhindered operation in commodity speculation; or is a move to ensure supply of agricultural products and raw material for farm-exporting countries. In any case, as evident from the Covid-19 experience, unrestricted exports in a situation of food crisis may go to the highest bidder and not to those countries that need such supplies the most.

While this issue has not received any major focus in the submissions leading up to MC14, there may be a strong push for launching negotiations after MC14. However, from a developing-country perspective, it should be parked for a future date after outstanding issues such as PSH, SSM, cotton and domestic support are resolved.

6. Market access: The liberalisation of markets through import duty cuts, one of the three pillars of the AoA, was always of major interest for agricultural exporters and many developed countries. Some suggestions, for example cuts through the Swiss Formulae, have been discussed but could not be agreed. The discussion had got stymied around 2008 but has now been re-invigorated for some time.

In the most recent phase preceding MC14, major agricultural exporting countries have been actively pushing for market access disciplines. This is notable in the submission by the Mercosur countries on market access (JOB/AG/255/Rev.1, 5 December 2025, see short summary and analysis below). The submission suggests concrete steps for restarting tariff-cut negotiations post MC14 and also links it to the SSM. However, interest among some of the key developed countries which have traditionally been demanders of market access

seems to be somewhat mixed. The EU, possibly worried about farmers' protests in response to Ukraine concessions and its recent free trade agreement with Mercosur, and other farm-defensive countries such as Switzerland and Japan seem more hesitant to push for market liberalisation. The US had been linking market access with domestic support (in the case of cotton, for example) and the SSM, but now seems to be focusing on the bilateral route to reach its objective, making multilateral WTO negotiations less influential. However, commitments in the US bilateral trade deals with several countries may tie the latter's hands even in future WTO negotiations. The US' flouting of WTO rules regarding MFN and bound rates may also have some implications going forward.

It is important that market liberalisation is pursued only after major developing-country issues have been resolved as otherwise developing countries will not be in a position to commit to further opening of their markets.

B) Latest submissions in the run-up to MC14, and the Chair's text

This section provides short summaries of and key analytical points from the main submissions made prior to MC14 (in chronological order) and ends with an analysis of the CoA-SS Chair's text (27 February and 5 March revised version). These provide a quick view of the different positions and approaches of Member States to the agricultural negotiations and an indication of the political dynamics on the road to and beyond Yaounde.

1. Sectoral Initiative in Favour of Cotton (C-4) and Côte d'Ivoire (WT/MIN(26)/1, TN/AG/GEN/56, TN/AG/SCC/GEN/27, 4 December 2025)

- The Bamako Ministerial Declaration on Cotton, by the C-4 countries and Côte d'Ivoire, is the only submission that calls for a concrete and fair agreement at MC14 itself (instead of postponing an outcome to MC15) "in order to phase out all forms of trade-distorting support on cotton" and deliver a tangible outcome on domestic support, marking 20 years since the Hong Kong mandate.
- It recalls past Ministerial Decisions on cotton (Geneva 2004, Hong Kong 2005, Nairobi 2015) and calls on the Ministerial Conference to "be committed to concluding the Doha Round" while addressing the concerns of developing countries and LDCs, especially of African cotton producers.
- It needs to be remembered that cotton remains an important issue for African countries, the significance of which cannot be undermined in a Ministerial based in Cameroon. However, cotton must not be turned into a bargaining tool by developed countries against which critical concessions will be extracted in other areas within or outside the agricultural negotiations. Cotton has an important and independent mandate by itself which must be resolved on its own.

2. African Group (WT/GC/W/977, TN/AG/W/12, 4 December 2025)

- The submission presents detailed, development-oriented provisions for an MC14 Ministerial Decision, emphasising the need for adequate policy space for developing countries to pursue food security, strengthen domestic agricultural production, and ensure resilience to global shocks. It also stresses the importance of improving global food security across all its dimensions and strongly reaffirms S&DT for developing countries and LDCs.
- A key contribution is the proposed crisis tool allowing developing countries facing severe food crises to exceed the 10% product-specific *de minimis* up to 20% of the value of production for three years.
- The proposal also calls for fair and progressive reductions in trade-distorting domestic support, prioritising the most inequitable elements, while safeguarding and strengthening S&DT and preserving development policy space to design and implement agricultural policies in line with national development and food system priorities.

- It further demands and provides a pathway for a balanced permanent solution on public stockholding by MC15 and measures to address cotton imbalances.
- Despite its clarity and depth in articulating the development dimension of the agricultural trade negotiations, the proposal reportedly faced resistance apparently on account of inadequate time to negotiate substantive elements.

3. *Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay (JOB/AG/255/Rev.1, 5 December 2025)*

- The proposal advances an ambitious market access agenda, including tariff simplification, addressing tariff escalation and peaks, cotton tariffs, and tariff reductions to be negotiated between MC14 and MC15. However, duty-free and quota-free market access for cotton exports from LDCs is framed only as a best-endeavour commitment, while other obligations appear binding. It proposes agreeing on a tariff-reduction formula by MC15, setting a hard target in a contentious area.
- An important point to note is the suggestion for an SSM for developing countries, but with the stipulation that the resulting tariff response cannot exceed the pre-cut bound tariff rates. This means that unless a developing country cuts its tariffs, it cannot benefit from the SSM (as its remedial tariff cannot go above the previous tariff). This formulation is extremely problematic. First, it goes against the developing-country position that the SSM must not be linked to further market access. Second, past discussions on the SSM and the 2008 Draft Modalities text had already shown broad agreement on the need for the remedy under the SSM to exceed current bound rates; the disagreement was more on the extent to which this could be allowed. However, the formulation in the current proposal limits the scope of the remedy to current bound tariff rates.
- Further, the proposal prioritises market access before resolving mandated issues such as PSH, SSM independence, cotton, and domestic support with S&DT.

4. *Jamaica (JOB/AG/270, 5 December 2025)*

- The MC14 declaration proposal reaffirms that S&DT is integral to the agriculture negotiations and highlights the urgent need to strengthen global food security, particularly for developing countries, LDCs and NFIDCs.
- However, by pointing to “the long-term objective to establish a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system and to provide for substantial progressive reductions in agricultural support and protection”, it fails to recognise that developing countries and LDCs have not really benefitted from a market-oriented global trading system, nor from reduction of tariffs and subsidies. In fact, both these policy tools have been vital for developing countries in preserving farmers’ livelihoods and ensuring domestic agricultural production.
- In addition, its call for exploring “new approaches”, a position advocated apparently by the US, can be perilous in the current context as an open-ended and undefined new framework could undermine developing-country interests. Many developing Members have cautioned against departing from established mandates.
- The proposal recognises the vulnerabilities of smallholder farmers amid crises and climate shocks, but could better reflect the disproportionate impacts on developing countries and LDCs.
- Finally, it calls for advancing negotiations on “all pillars and topics”. This significantly risks sidelining mandated priorities such as PSH, SSM and cotton, and forcing developing countries into costly concessions, potentially on multiple occasions.³

5. *Brazil (JOB/AG/271, 5 December 2025)*

- Brazil’s proposal outlines a structured negotiation process between MC14 and MC15, recognising the role of the CoA-SS Chair in organising negotiating schedules and preparing balanced textual proposals based on Members’ submissions to guide discussions across negotiation areas.
- It proposes criteria such as broadly equivalent levels of ambition across issues. However, placing all issues on equal footing risks overlooking longstanding priorities of developing countries that remain unresolved.

- The proposal stresses transparency, timely document circulation and effective participation. However, it also suggests “actively identify[ing] potential areas of cross-pillar trade-offs”, which can be challenging for developing countries and LDCs as it can lock them into making compromises, even in areas with strong historical mandates for which they have already made concessions.
- In a significant omission, while the proposal addresses DS reform, Green Box subsidies, market access, SSM and S&DT, it fails to mention the mandated permanent solution on PSH.

6. LDC Group (WT/GC/W/980/Rev.1, TN/AG/W/13, 8 December 2025)

- The proposal highlights the outcomes of the dedicated work programme under paragraph 8 of the MC12 Declaration on food insecurity (G/AG/38), stressing that LDCs and NFIDCs should make full use of available flexibilities to strengthen agricultural production and domestic food security, especially in emergencies.
- The Group supports continuing AoA reform towards a “fair” agricultural trading system with S&DT. The reference to a “fair” and not a “fair and market-oriented” agricultural trading system (as is standardly referred to in the AoA and many of the other submissions) is significant. There is a clear recognition that global agricultural markets, given their high degree of concentration, speculation and volatility, cannot fully address the complexities and inequities, and the structural challenges faced by developing countries and LDCs.
- The LDC Group has reiterated calls for eliminating trade-distorting cotton support, establishing an SSM, and securing a permanent solution on PSH including reviewing the outdated 1986–88 ERP, while highlighting vulnerabilities from supply disruptions, price volatility, disasters and external shocks.

7. Indonesia (TN/AG/W/14, 27 January 2026)

- Indonesia’s MC14 proposal strongly reaffirms S&DT in both the chapeau and the operative text, emphasising the need to preserve policy space for developing countries and LDCs to support smallholders, strengthen resilience and address structural imbalances.
- It also recalls past food security mandates and reiterates commitments towards an interim mechanism and permanent solution on PSH, recognising its critical role in safeguarding food security and vulnerable populations.
- The call for “balanced progress across **all pillars**” (emphasis added) may dilute longstanding developing-country priorities and require more trade-offs, as discussed above. However, Indonesia makes an important qualification that such progress must “take into account development priorities”. But the reference to “development priorities of **all Members**” (emphasis added) can be further nuanced as all Members are not in an equal or equitable position regarding their development status. Those who are lagging behind must have access to greater policy tools in order to catch up.
- The proposal suggests more intensive negotiations around “the use and design of food security instruments”, which, according to Footnote 1, refers to PSH and SSM. However, the reference and centrality of these mandated issues could be made more specific and upfront.

8. Argentina (JOB/AG/272, 20 February 2026)

- The construct shifts post-MC14 work towards a “reform of global agricultural trade” and a “relaunch” of negotiations under Article 20 of the AoA. The term “relaunch” implies starting anew, disregarding decades of developing-country and LDC engagement and progress, despite ongoing proposals and their active participation, as well as important Ministerial mandates secured by developing countries since the AoA came into being.
- The reform agenda promoted by some Cairns Group members as emphasised in this proposal advances the idea of deeper liberalisation through tariff and subsidy cuts. However, such liberalisation may be neither feasible nor necessarily development-friendly. To reiterate, past experience shows unfettered trade liberalisation does not guarantee food security, food sovereignty or income stability, especially amid structural inequalities.

- Basing “reform on Article 20”, as suggested in the proposal, risks eroding Doha Round development gains and policy space. An open-ended agenda weakens S&DT and sidelines longstanding priorities of developing countries and LDCs.

9. *Australia, Brazil, Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Switzerland and Ukraine (WT/MIN(26)/W/6, 6 March 2026)*

The latest submission, coming even after the revised Chair’s text (see below), suggests a new framework titled “Emerging Agricultural Trade (EAT) issues”. The submission urges “informal and open-ended deliberations through a Dialogue on Emerging Agricultural Trade (EAT) issues, to be reported to the General Council, with a view to supporting well-functioning agricultural markets, taking into account sustainable development and diversity of agricultural systems, production conditions and development needs and challenges across the Membership”. The submission repeatedly focuses on different dimensions of “emerging agricultural policies and measures”. With the focus on “environmental and social outcomes”, the approach falls in line with the efforts to bring in sustainability into the agricultural negotiations. While the approach is one of open dialogue and not immediate negotiations, it attempts to gradually bring in a new agenda altogether, one that is not bound to respect previous Ministerial mandates or work on key issues that have been pursued for decades.

10. *Chair’s texts (JOB/AG/273, 27 February 2026, and JOB/AG/273/Rev.1, 5 March 2026)*

On 27 February, the Chair of the CoA-SS, Ambassador Hussain of Pakistan, presented a “Draft Declaration on Agriculture, Trade and Food Security” ahead of MC14, for the consideration of the WTO Membership. As expected, the draft does not suggest any concrete outcome on any specific issue from MC14 itself, but rather a path forward after the Ministerial.

Interestingly, the draft, especially the chapeau, is almost entirely drawn from the Jamaican proposal (see B.4 above). As in that proposal, the draft highlights the objective of “establishing a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system and of providing for substantial progressive reductions in agricultural support and protection”, thus suggesting a path of unfettered market-oriented trade liberalisation. The draft points to the limited progress achieved to date on several negotiating issues, and the need to address the “existing stalemate in the negotiations”. This idea of a stalemate is found in the Jamaican, Argentine and Brazilian proposals.

A positive feature of the chapeau is that it highlights that “special and differential treatment for developing country Members is an integral part of the negotiations”, as well as recognising “the urgent need to strengthen global food security, particularly for developing country Members, including least developed countries and net food-importing developing countries”. The draft also notes the “heightened vulnerabilities of farmers, particularly smallholder farmers, and rural communities, which threaten livelihoods and food security and have been exacerbated by extreme weather events and recent global crises, including pandemics and conflicts, requiring urgent, balanced, and development-oriented responses”.

In the operational part, the draft suggests a few concrete ideas. The first is a commitment to “engaging constructively and transparently to establish a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system and to deliver outcomes that, inter alia, strengthen global food security”. Second, the draft suggests committing to “continuing the agriculture negotiations pursuant to the reform process set out in Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture, and subsequent Ministerial Decisions and Declarations”. Third, the draft also suggests that future work under the CoA-SS be based on “discussions among Members, including their existing and future contributions and submissions”.

A market-oriented agricultural trading system, as discussed above, has already failed developing countries. Meanwhile, the idea of a reform agenda as set out in Article 20 is visible in the Argentine and Brazilian proposals. But without having resolved longstanding older issues first, further reform can be challenging for developing countries. A positive element of the Chair’s text is that it establishes a continuity of the negotiations,

respecting both previous Ministerial mandates as well as Members' contributions and submissions. It is crucial that the text reaffirms the importance of past Ministerial Decisions and Declarations, as these include notable gains for developing countries, including in Doha, Bali and Nairobi. Significantly, the text does not mention "new approaches", which had been proposed earlier by Jamaica apparently with the backing of the US but which was opposed by several developing countries.

The main lacuna in the draft is the failure to specifically mention and reaffirm the mandated issues where work is already advanced, such as PSH, SSM, cotton and domestic support. While an MC14 declaration must reflect and consolidate the positions of all Members, it must also recognise the interests of the majority of Members. For example, the African Group, the LDC Group and Indonesia have clearly articulated the need for PSH and SSM. The African Group, the LDC Group and the C-4 countries along with Côte d'Ivoire have articulated the need for a decision on cotton. However, these issues are not specifically mentioned. While the text does not specifically place "all pillars" on par, it falls short of reaffirming and prioritising issues of interest to most developing countries, NFIDCs and LDCs. The text does not include any reference to a crisis tool either (the need for which was articulated by the African Group and the LDC Group), possibly in order to ensure consensus, though multiple crises were mentioned as a critical issue in several submissions. The draft seems to largely reflect ideas from a few proposals and fails to incorporate important elements of the other proposals.

Interestingly, according to news reports,⁴ this draft was rejected by the US as it does not see the need for an agriculture text for MC14, and also because of the mention of past Ministerial mandates and the suggestion to "continue negotiations" rather than address a stalemate. Apparently, some of the Latin American countries criticised it as they felt it places too much emphasis on food security and does not address the "stalemate", while they also wanted the need for reform on all three pillars of the AoA highlighted. China, the European Union, India and the African Group expressed their willingness to use this document as a basis for moving forward. However, India and the African Group wanted clarity on the treatment of past mandates, and India wanted mention of policy flexibilities for developing countries, including in relation to PSH programmes. The C-4 countries expressed disappointment that nothing specific was included on cotton subsidies even though they accepted the draft in principle.

Revised text

According to news reports,⁵ the revised version of the draft was released on 5 March, in which the Chair expanded the paragraph on global food security in the chapeau, by adding "Recognising ... the role that the **reform of agricultural trade** can play in responding to the challenges facing agricultural production and trade, including price volatility, extreme weather events and exposure to global shocks and crises" (emphasis added). This adds more emphasis on reform, or in other words, deeper liberalisation as a panacea for all challenges to agricultural trade and food security, of which there is no evidence. This seems to be a response to the demands of the Latin American countries.

Most significant is the addition of a reference to "new approaches" in Paragraph 3 of the operational segment, apparently to appease the US. This paragraph now reads, "agrees that the negotiations shall continue on the basis of Members' existing and future contributions, **including proposals on possible new approaches to advance the negotiations**" (emphasis added).

However, it is not clear whether the US will accept this text. On the other hand, India has apparently raised an objection asking for specific mention of the permanent solution on PSH, based on its long-outstanding mandate. Whether the Chair will further revise the text or send it to the Ministerial, and what happens between now and MC14 therefore continue to be uncertain.

As we approach MC14

It remains to be seen how Member States respond to the Chair's revised text, and how they determine the approach and modalities on further work on the agriculture issues following MC14. As already argued, the mandate on a pathway forward is critically important. Ministerial-level guidance from MC14 on future work on agriculture must be underpinned by the following points:

- Principles that uphold the integration and preservation of S&DT must underpin all future work.
- A comprehensive framework around food security/sovereignty is required that underlines the need for policy tools for developing countries, NFIDCs and LDCs to manage crises and volatility; promote agricultural development including for augmentation of agricultural production and protection of livelihoods and incomes of farmers; ensure food security for their citizens; and support nationally designed sustainability initiatives.
- Overdue development outcomes must be resolved first, and a sequence of negotiations must be established based on priorities of the majority of Members and on past mandates. Placing all pillars and topics on par poses serious risk to the resolution of issues of interest to developing countries and LDCs, and may also require double concessions for already mandated outcomes.
- Clearly and strongly reaffirm mandated issues such as PSH, SSM, cotton, and disciplines on domestic support that integrate S&DT and address the inequitable elements of such support first.
- Any new approach or framework, including of sustainability, must not be introduced without resolving outstanding issues.

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Notes

¹ Sharma, Sachin (2016): *The WTO and Food Security*, Springer.

² Sharma, Sachin Kumar (2020): "A Quantitative Analysis of Proposals on Domestic Support in WTO Agriculture Negotiations: Need for Reaffirming the Development Agenda", Centre for WTO Studies Working Paper No. CWS/WP/200/63, September.

³ For example, developing countries had already agreed to the Trade Facilitation Agreement at the Bali Ministerial in 2013 in exchange for an interim solution on PSH along with a permanent solution to be agreed by 2017. Now they may again have to make concessions, in market access or export restrictions, in order to get a permanent solution.

⁴ <https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2026/ti260304.htm>

⁵ <https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2026/ti260307.htm>