The WTO's MC14 ended not with a deal, but with a walkout. Here is what that means.

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Yaoundé was supposed to be a turning point. The WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference opened on 26 March in Cameroon, only the second time a ministerial has been held on African soil, with an agenda that included WTO reform, agricultural mandates undelivered since 2015, fisheries subsidies, digital trade, and investment rules. Nearly 2,000 trade officials and more than 90 ministers attended. The expectations were carefully managed but real.

Four days later, ministers were still in the room at midnight. The Director-General apologised for keeping them there. The Chair admitted they had run out of time. And the two instruments that developing countries most urgently needed to protect, a moratorium shielding access to medicines from legal challenge, and a moratorium keeping digital trade policy open, were declared expired by 31st of March, while a tax arrangement benefiting Silicon Valley dominated the final hours of negotiation.

This is what happened, why it happened, and what it reveals about who the WTO actually serves.

What was actually adopted and what was not

Start with the official record, because the gap between what was adopted and what the WTO's Director-General is calling a "Yaoundé package" tells you everything about the state of this institution.

Two decisions were formally adopted at MC14. One concerns the integration of small economies into the multilateral trading system. The other strengthens special and differential treatment provisions in two specific technical agreements. Both were agreed in Geneva before ministers even boarded their flights to Cameroon. They were pre-cooked. Ministers adopted them in minutes.

Everything else is unfinished. The WTO reform declaration. The e-commerce decision. The TRIPS moratorium. The fisheries subsidies text. The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) package. All of it moves to Geneva for further negotiation at the next General Council meeting.

The Director-General is calling this collection of unfinished draft texts a "Yaoundé package." In her own words at the closing heads of delegation meeting, she said: "We are very close, but we're not all the way there yet." That is a reasonable description of a work in progress. It is not a ministerial outcome. Calling unfinished drafts a package is institutional messaging designed to dress up a failure as a pause. The distinction matters, because it shapes what

governments and civil society will be asked to accept in Geneva under time pressure.

The e-commerce fight: how a demand for permanence brought down the ministerial

The most visible trigger for the suspension was the e-commerce moratorium. To understand what this is, think of it this way: every time you stream a film, use a search engine, or buy software online, that transaction crosses borders as a digital transmission. Since 1998, WTO members have agreed not to impose customs duties on those transmissions. What began as a provisional measure in a nascent digital economy became, nearly three decades later, a structural arrangement that benefits the largest technology corporations in the world, the overwhelming majority of which are based in the United States. As of the end of March 2026, that moratorium has now expired.

The Trump administration came to Yaoundé not to renew it, but to make it permanent. Not extended for two years, as Brazil proposed. Not extended for four, as others suggested. But permanent. When it became clear that no consensus existed for permanence, the US blocked agreement on everything else. Agriculture. WTO reform. Fisheries. All of it.

Brazil's position throughout was that a two-year extension was sufficient, consistent with every previous renewal since 1998. That is a normal negotiating position. It is what every WTO member had accepted at every previous ministerial. Presenting Brazil's refusal to go beyond two years as equivalent to the US refusal to accept anything less than permanence is a false equivalence, and it is one that the Director-General's carefully vague language at the closing, "some members have attempted to negotiate terms regarding the e-commerce moratorium, but that has not been possible", risks encouraging.

The US was not defending an existing arrangement. It was trying to convert a temporary arrangement into a permanent one, and when that conversion was refused, it walked away from everything else on the table. The moratorium has now lapsed. But the political damage, the suspension of a ministerial, the freezing of agricultural mandates, the expiry of the TRIPS instrument alongside it, was entirely of Washington's making.

Two moratoria expired. Only one had anyone fighting for it.

The e-commerce moratorium did not expire alone. Alongside it, a second instrument lapsed at the end of March: the moratorium on TRIPS Non-Violation and Situation Complaints. The Director-General confirmed both in her closing statement. They are officially gone. But they are not the same thing, and the fact that they expired together, bundled into the same institutional sentence, deserves more scrutiny than it has received.

The e-commerce moratorium is a duty-free lane for digital transmissions, built over nearly three decades into a structural subsidy for Big Tech. Its expiry is, for many developing countries, not a loss but a potential opening, the first moment since 1998 that they could choose their own approach to taxing digital trade.
The TRIPS moratorium does something entirely different. The TRIPS Agreement is the WTO's rulebook on intellectual property. It includes flexibilities that allow governments to override patents in specific circumstances: to produce a generic HIV medicine locally, to import a cheaper cancer drug, to require a foreign platform to store data on national servers. Non-violation complaints are a mechanism that could be used to challenge those flexibilities, not by pointing to a broken rule, but by arguing that an expected commercial benefit was undermined. The moratorium has suspended that risk since 1999. Its expiry reopens it, for medicines, for digital policy, for public health tools that developing countries have spent decades fighting to protect.
Colombia understood this. A Colombian minister, a medical doctor, stood up in the final session and proposed a short extension to prevent the TRIPS moratorium from lapsing while Geneva consultations continue. Bangladesh and Egypt backed it. It was not adopted. No European delegation stood up to defend it. The EU, which presents itself as a champion of global health and multilateral cooperation, said nothing of note, while expending considerable energy on the e-commerce moratorium that serves Silicon Valley.
That contrast is not incidental. It tells you whose interests were being protected in Yaoundé, and whose were not.

The deeper cause: a system serving the wrong interests

Reducing what happened in Yaoundé to the e-commerce fight would be a mistake. The structural problems run deeper, and they predate the Trump administration by decades.
Developing countries came to MC14 with demands that have been on the table since at least 2015. A permanent solution on public stockholding for food security, think of it as the right of governments like India’s to buy grain from farmers at guaranteed prices and store it for distribution to the poor, without being challenged at the WTO for distorting agricultural markets. A Special Safeguard Mechanism to protect farmers in developing countries from sudden import surges that undercut local production. Progress on cotton subsidies that rich countries pay their own farmers, making it impossible for West African cotton producers to compete on price. These are mandated issues. Commitments made by WTO members at previous ministerials and never delivered.
Instead of progress on those commitments, developing countries encountered a WTO reform agenda driven by the US and EU that would discipline their industrial policy while leaving intact the agricultural subsidies and corporate

welfare of rich countries. They encountered a proposed “Dialogue on Emerging Agricultural Trade Issues”, co-sponsored by Brazil alongside Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, that would open a new track on agricultural governance driven by export-oriented agribusiness economies, with sustainability language as cover for market liberalisation objectives. And they encountered a push to incorporate the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement into the WTO’s legal architecture, a plurilateral initiative that bypassed the consensus-based process the institution is supposed to uphold.

India held firm on IFD. South Africa, which had dropped its earlier block in December, at least insisted publicly on guardrails, meaning explicit protections to ensure the agreement could not be used to override national development priorities or expand investor rights beyond its stated scope. The joint counter-proposal on reform from India, Oman, and South Africa, insisting on open-ended formats, no selective groupings, and unfulfilled mandates on the agenda, signalled clearly that even countries willing to engage on reform drew a line at process capture by the powerful.

What the EU’s role reveals

From a European civil society perspective, the behaviour of the EU delegation deserves scrutiny. Europe arrived in Yaoundé presenting itself as a defender of multilateralism and rules-based trade. In practice, it spent the week aligned with US positions on the moratorium, pushing a WTO reform agenda that serves European industrial interests, and co-sponsoring the agricultural dialogue that would crowd out development mandates.

This reflects a structural convergence between US and EU trade agendas that has been building for years. Both want a WTO that disciplines emerging economy industrial policy. Both want plurilaterals that allow self-selected groups of powerful states to set new rules without consensus. Both benefit from a moratorium that keeps digital trade outside the reach of developing country tax policy. The tactical disagreements between Washington and Brussels are real, but on the fundamentals of what the WTO should be used for, the interests of the North are remarkably aligned.

What comes next and why it matters

The “Yaoundé package” will now be negotiated in Geneva, under time pressure, with two moratoria officially declared expired. That combination, urgency, legal uncertainty, and a set of draft texts already weighted towards Northern priorities, is a favourable environment for extracting concessions from developing countries that could not be secured at the ministerial.

The fisheries text is the one area where genuine multilateral progress was made. Consensus was reached in the final session on a commitment to continue

negotiations towards MC15 with a view to comprehensive disciplines on harmful subsidies. That is modest, but it is real, and it happened through the consensus-based process that plurilateral advocates have been trying to bypass elsewhere. Everything else requires vigilance. The reform declaration heading to Geneva contains language on decision-making processes and facilitator-led negotiations that could, if adopted in its current form, institutionalise the very methods that developing countries spent this week objecting to. The e-commerce decision still has, in the DG's own words, "missing numbers", meaning the duration of any extension remains open. The TRIPS moratorium is now in a race against legal uncertainty, with public health consequences that Colombia named clearly and that Geneva negotiators must not be allowed to forget.

The question that MC14 leaves unanswered

The Director-General closed MC14 by declaring it the beginning of "a new WTO way of working." The Chair called it "the reborn of the WTO."

That language sits uneasily with a ministerial that adopted two pre-agreed procedural decisions, suspended everything substantive, and ended after midnight with ministers who had long since caught their flights home.

The question for the trade justice movement is not whether the WTO can be saved, or reborn, or modernised. It is whether the current moment of system breakdown , the geopolitical fracturing, the exposure of the institution's structural biases, the US willingness to blow up a ministerial for the sake of Silicon Valley's tax arrangements, can be used to build genuine political support for a different kind of multilateral trade framework. One grounded in development, food sovereignty, policy space, and democratic accountability. One that delivers on the mandated issues that have been deferred since 2015. One that does not require developing countries to trade away public health instruments in exchange for digital trade rules written for someone else's corporations.

That is the work that lies ahead. The ministers who flew to Yaoundé for a turning point flew home without one. But the week exposed, with unusual clarity, what this institution prioritises and what it does not. That exposure is, in its own way, useful. The case for a fundamentally different multilateral trade framework, one that puts development, food sovereignty, and public health above the commercial interests of the most powerful, has rarely been easier to make. The task now is to make it count.

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