

GENEVA Watch

AN OVERVIEW OF THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS ON AGRICULTURE



WTO Reform Options: Governance Takes Center Stage

As the World Trade Organization (WTO) inches closer to its 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) in March 2026, momentum for institutional reform is building. At the heart of this renewed push is governance reform which is widely acknowledged by Members as the linchpin for broader change.

Ambassador Petter Ølberg of Norway, the designated Facilitator, reported that his second round of consultations revealed a growing consensus: revamping the WTO's decision-making and negotiation processes is the foremost priority. Known as "Track 1" of the reform process, governance is viewed as a gateway to progress on development issues (Track 2) and emerging global challenges (Track 3).

Consensus Under the Microscope

While Members broadly reaffirmed their support for the principle of consensus – long regarded as a cornerstone of the WTO's legitimacy and inclusiveness – many expressed frustrations with how it has been operationalized. Several delegates highlighted that consensus does not imply unanimity, and that its misuse by a small number of Members (notably India and South Africa) has led to institutional paralysis.

Calls are mounting for a more pragmatic, outcome-driven approach. Citing Article IX of the Marrakesh Agreement, which permits voting under exceptional circumstances, some Members floated the idea of developing clear, narrowly defined criteria for when voting could be considered.

"While consensus should remain the default, some suggested that criteria be developed – applied carefully and sparingly – to identify exceptional circumstances under which voting could be considered," Ambassador Ølberg noted. "This would help protect the WTO from systemic inertia without undermining the spirit of consensus," he added.

Plurilateral Agreements: Flexible Fix or Fragmentation Risk?

Another reform mechanism is the role of plurilateral agreements. Many Members see these as a pragmatic solution for advancing negotiations on key issues where full consensus among the WTO's 166 Members remains elusive.

Provided they remain transparent, non-discriminatory, and open to all Members, plurilaterals are being regarded as stepping stones towards broader multilateral solutions. Still, some delegations voiced concern about potential system fragmentation and the risk of marginalizing smaller or less influential Members.

In response, several Members suggested "Opt-In/Opt-Out" frameworks as a way to maintain inclusiveness while allowing differentiated participation levels. Other proposals emphasized safeguarding against vetoes based solely on non-participation, while ensuring the legal coherence of plurilateral outcomes within the multilateral system.

Looking Ahead to MC14

With geopolitical tensions straining the multilateral trading system, many anticipate that MC14 will break from past conferences – in both format and substance. Delegates have been encouraged to reflect on the structure and ambition of MC14, and to begin laying the groundwork for a post-Ministerial reform roadmap.

Agriculture: Progress Elusive, but Dialogue Deepens

Agriculture negotiations remain bogged down in longstanding divisions. Ambassador Hussain of Pakistan, Chair

of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoASS), reported little cause for optimism. He cited a lack of signals that would suggest imminent breakthroughs on core pillars such as market access and domestic support. Some technical groundwork is being laid for the next CoASS informal session during the week of September 22. At Brazil's request, the WTO Secretariat will deliver presentations on the history of market access negotiations and how regional trade agreements have tackled agricultural market access.

The long-awaited joint submission by the Cairns Group and the African Group on domestic support is still pending, though both coalitions are continuing their informal conceptual work "without prejudice."

Ambassador Hussain hopes that further contributions or submissions will be made in September in order to organize technical-level engagement and thematic sessions.

Looking ahead, Ambassador Hussain outlined a set of potential outcomes that could shape the agricultural negotiations at MC14. These include issuing a broad political declaration reaffirming Members' commitment to the continuation of agriculture talks, as well as taking stock of the technical work and progress achieved to date.

He also highlighted the possibility of delivering early results targeted at alleviating food insecurity among vulnerable WTO Members. A post-Ministerial work program is also under consideration, potentially based on the draft Ministerial Declaration from MC13 or the July 2024 General Council Decision.

Members may aim to reach concrete outcomes on mandated issues such as Public Stockholding (PSH), the Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM), and cotton.

The most ambitious outcome may be to push forward comprehensive disciplines across all major negotiating pillars, in an effort to reinvigorate the stalled agricultural reform agenda.

By the end of September, the Chair hopes to gain greater clarity on the contours of a potential outcome and the level of ambition Members are prepared to bring to the table at MC14.