



AN OVERVIEW OF THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS ON AGRICULTURE

Agriculture: Uncertain Progress Six Months Before MC14

On September 23, Ambassador Ali Sarfraz Hussain (Pakistan), Chair of the WTO agricultural negotiations, briefed Members of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoASS) on the status of discussions ahead of the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14), scheduled for March 2026 in Cameroon.

According to the Chair, his recent consultations revealed a climate that is both realistic and pragmatic but marked by skepticism about the possibility of overcoming differences within six months. The instability of the international trading system further complicates the search for consensus. Nevertheless, several delegations emphasized the need to achieve concrete results, particularly on food security.

The WTO Secretariat reviewed the evolution of discussions on agricultural market access since 1999 and presented an analysis of regional trade agreements. The data show that while tariffs on agricultural products have been reduced and often in bilateral and regional trade agreements, they remain higher than for industrial goods.

The Chair said three main dynamics are emerging among Members:

those already actively consulting (notably the Cairns Group and the African Group, focused on domestic support and public stockholding for food security purposes (PSH);

those prioritizing their internal consultations first;

and those (market access proponents) seeking the Chair's support to engage with others.

In this context of persistent differences and in the absence of new formal proposals, Ambassador Hussain does not intend, at this stage, to propose a compromise text. However, some Members believe that food security could serve as a basis for an agreement, with targeted measures for vulnerable countries.

Finally, several delegations called for more technical discussions and expert events to maintain the momentum of the talks. The Chair encouraged Members to submit their written contributions promptly, emphasizing that the negotiations must remain transparent and inclusive if they hope to achieve tangible results at MC14.

China Renounces Special and Differential Treatment at the WTO

In an official communication to the WTO General Council, China has sent a strong signal to Members announcing that it will no longer seek new special and differential treatment (S&D) in current and future trade negotiations.

The announcement was made by Premier Li Qiang on September 23, during the United Nations General Assembly in New York. China described itself as a “responsible major developing country” determined to defend and strengthen the multilateral trading system, which it views as under strain from growing protectionism and unilateralism.

The principle of S&D provides developing Members with certain flexibilities in implementing WTO agreements, such as longer transition periods and technical assistance. China's status as the world's largest commodity trader and second-largest economy has led to calls to abandon its S&D privileges.

China framed its decision as a political commitment to the multilateral order. The document denounces the rise of “protectionism and unilateralism,” pointing to “the arbitrary imposition of tariffs by a certain member” – a clear reference to the US.

The move is presented as both a “solemn commitment” and concrete action to safeguard the WTO's credibility. Beijing argues it will also help deliver development-oriented outcomes at MC14 and facilitate

progress on the WTO reform agenda.

However, China was careful to emphasize that the announcement does not alter its status as a developing member of the WTO. Beijing retains full access to existing S&D provisions and stressed that this decision “does not constitute any precedent” for other international organizations or treaties.

WTO Director General, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, praised the decision, stressing that “China's decision reflects a commitment to a more balanced and equitable global trading system” at this pivotal moment for the WTO. “It sends a strong signal of support for WTO reform and will help foster a more level playing field for all Members,” she said, adding that China’s move “will undoubtedly energize discussions and help us work towards a more agile and effective organization for the 21st century.”

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