AFRICA CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON WTO MC14 FEBRUARY 3-5, 2026 ENTEBBE, UGANDA

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

I. A consultative meeting of African civil society organisations, independent trade experts, Geneva-based delegates, intergovernmental policy institutions, trade unions, officials from the capitals, took place in Entebbe, Uganda, from February, 3-5 , 2026, to deliberate on issues of specific concern to Africa as the continent plays host to the fourteenth (14^{th}) World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference (MC14), scheduled for March 26-29, in Yaoundé, Cameroon. This was jointly organised by Third World Network-Africa (TWN- Africa), SEATINI-Uganda and ENDA-CACID, under the umbrella of Africa Trade Network (ATN).

II. Participants noted the Ministerial Conference in Cameroon as a critical moment where the elements of reform of the Multilateral trade system will be debated and set a foundational direction for the trade system. Critical to the reform are two competing paradigms. There is the paradigm driven by the global North which is seeking to impose more burdens on Africa and other developing countries. The alternative paradigm, which is developmental, is a reform of inclusivity, equity, allowing the use of industrial policies and addressing the inequities in the multilateral system. Africa must be vigilant and contest the reform agenda guided by the latter.

III. Participants noted that the current landscape of multilateralism is characterized by heightened uncertainty for the multilateral trading system. Geopolitical tensions, geoeconomic fragmentation, and overlapping climate, debt, and cost-of-living crises that are reshaping trade patterns and financial flows, with significant implications for developing economies.

IV. Participants noted the issues on the agenda of the MC14-WTO reforms, proposed plurilateral agreements-investment facilitation agreement, proposed agreement on electronic commerce- and their implication for Africa's development. The meeting also discussed Africa's own strategic demands towards MC14 and other issues such Africa's Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and what should be the positioning of Africa as it hosts MC14 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

V. On the multilateralism, the consultation noted the heightened contestation by the powerful countries such as the US, China, EU, Japan, Australia, etc, with their respective positions that will serve their interests. Africa and other developing countries must remain vigilant in this contestation in order not to sacrifice their interests.

VI. Specifically on the WTO, the US is making demands that will dismantle the foundational elements of the WTO-single undertaking, Most Favoured Nation, Special and Differential Treatment (SD&T) and rather pushing for plurilaterals as the primary negotiating route.

That special and differential treatment should be narrowed to temporary adjustment rather than recognised as a structural feature of the system.

VII. Other powerful members also support reforms that serve their interests and are also dismantling the trade system. China, EU, Japan, Australia are legitimizing plurilateral agreements, change in the consensus decision-making process, calling for establishing criteria for development status and redefining special and differential treatment (SD&T).

VIII. In the light of the above contestation participants carefully listened to all perspectives and took note of the current challenges faced by the WTO which may undermine the longstanding interests of the African Group. Participants commended the African Group delegates in Geneva for the positions expressed on the various issues. In the run up to the Ministerial Conference, the consultation called for close collaboration among the various stakeholders (government, CSOs, academia, private sector) in Africa to enhance the advancement of Africa's interest.

IX. On the proposed Investment Facilitation Agreement at the WTO, participants noted the negative implications on Africa's economic transformation if it is formally adopted at MC14. It will, among other things, set a negative precedent for rules making that will undermine multilateralism and reintroduce fragmentation under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) that Marrakesh Agreement aimed to end and will set a precedent for similar agreements. Also, African countries will face burdensome obligations in how they authorise and administer investment activities, place limits on criteria for approvals and on fees they can charge. Moreover, there is no evidence that this will attract new investment and ignores the real factors that influence investment decisions. Furthermore, the logic of the Investment Facilitation Agreement runs counter to the logic of the Investment Protocol of Africa's Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). For these reasons Africa has nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by supporting it.

X. Participants also noted the Plurilateral Agreement on Electronic Commerce (AEC) that is tabled for MC14. Digital trade has become one of the sharpest points of pressure in the WTO reform debate. The push to incorporate the plurilateral Agreement on Electronic Commerce under Annex 4 of the Marrkesh Agreement will create the same systemic challenges as mentioned in the preceding paragraph (just like the investment facilitation). Parallel efforts under the multilateral WTO Work Programme on Electronic Commerce to make the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions permanent and to define it to include content, would lock in a particular model of digital integration based on permanent openness, MFN treatment, and weak development flexibilities. This has major implications for Africa because it cuts directly across fiscal space, industrial policy, and data governance choices. African participation in the Agreement remains very limited, reflecting a substantive assessment that its design is misaligned with Africa's development priorities.

XI. This misalignment is especially evident when set against Africa's own digital governance frameworks, including the Africa Union (AU) Digital Transformation Strategy, the AU Data Policy Framework, the Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, the African Digital Compact, and the AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade. These instruments link digital integration to development, public digital infrastructure, and adequacy-based data governance, and leave space for sequencing and policy experimentation. Making the e- commerce moratorium permanent would remove tariffs as both a revenue source and a policy tool at a time when its scope remains undefined and continues to expand as more products are delivered digitally.

XII. On Africa's Industrial policy and transformation issues, participants discussed and concluded that Africa's development depends on transitioning from dependence on the production and export of primary commodities to higher value-added production. It is well established in economic history that value-addition occurs only when countries have been willing to apply industrial, trade and technology policies and deliberately manage and lead a transition of this nature.

XIII. The period of state led, import substitution industrialisation in the 1960s and 1970s saw African Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rates higher than global average and Manufacturing Value Addition (MVA) increasing by an average of 6.2 percent per annum. In contrast, the "lost two decades" of the 1980s and 1990s was a period when "Washington Consensus" and "Structural Adjustment" policies drove economic liberalisation, privatisation and the dismantling of state capacity.

XIV. The World Trade Organisation has been a major driver of policies of structural adjustment and the Washington consensus policies of liberalisation that led the removal of the state from a central role in economic development policies and ushered in privatisation. This actually led the continent in a direction of two decades of reduced manufacturing value addition. Africa cannot afford to go to the WTO MC14 and agree to anything that is likely to further constrain industrial policy, or which is likely to impact negatively on its ability to develop common approaches informed by the reality of a Continental Free Trade Area of building regional value.

XV. On agriculture participants discussed that it remains the lifeblood of African economies, sustaining communities, driving employment, and underpinning rural livelihoods. Agriculture contributes 23–35 percent of GDP in many African countries and employs up to 70 percent of the workforce, yet the continent paradoxically imports more than $50 billion in food annually. This contradiction underscores the urgency with which Africa must continue pursuing just global trade rules at the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14)—a moment described as not merely procedural, but a development-defining opportunity for the continent. Participants noted with concern that the agenda for MC14 is dominated by reform of the WTO, with limited time for other matters. Developing countries have strongly criticised the proposed process that centres around breakout groups, which fragment developing country solidarity, with limited transparency, and minimal time for plenary discussion. The programme is based on three themes that reflect the priorities of the major powers: decision-making, focused on redefining how consensus operates and normalising plurilateral negotiations and agreements; development and special and differential treatment that seeks to define criteria for development status and the nature and scope of SD&T. There is minimal space even in the venue for civil society.

XVI. As African countries head to MC14 in Yaoundé, the issue is no longer simply whether the big players are complying with WTO rules. It is how Africa can navigate a ministerial conference that appears to be structured around an onslaught on the development agenda itself. Across agriculture, technology transfer, industrial policy, and special and differential treatment, longstanding African priorities are being crowded out while pressure mounts to accept reforms that narrow policy space, entrench asymmetries, and normalise unilateral and plurilateral pathways. Market access is increasingly presented as temporary and conditional, multilateral rules as optional for the most powerful, and development flexibilities as obstacles to be managed rather than commitments to be honoured.

XVII. WTO MC14 thus confronts Africa with a choice: agree to a reform process that fragments negotiating issues and sidelines development concerns, or invest in collective resilience through African integration, coordinated positions, and a clear refusal to legitimise outcomes that weaken Africa's negotiating hand while preserving the freedom of powerful members to act outside the rules. Both Governments and civil society must reinforce each other for an outcome that is better for Africa.