

Roundtable Discussion on WTO MC 14 Future of Trade and Development Cooperation

18 March 2026

Tamarind Hall, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi

Concept Note

1. The Fourteenth Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) comes at a critical juncture for the global trading system. Amid heightened geopolitical tensions, economic fragmentation, and growing uncertainty about the future of multilateral cooperation, MC14 will be a pivotal moment for global trade governance. Progress on key issues will be essential to restoring stability, confidence, and credibility in the rules-based trading system.
2. For decades, the WTO served as the cornerstone of global trade governance. However, the global trade landscape has evolved rapidly. Shifting geopolitical dynamics, the rise of strategic competition, supply chain reconfiguration, and divergent development priorities have placed significant strain on multilateral trade rules and institutions.
3. The rules-based trading framework will need to respond to a range of emerging and unresolved issues. These include digital trade and the governance of cross-border data flows, investment facilitation, and sectoral negotiations in areas of strategic importance. At the same time, long-standing challenges such as the future of the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism, rule-making processes, and institutional reform remain central. The ability of countries and coalitions to navigate these issues collaboratively will shape not only the outcomes of MC14, but also the broader trajectory of global trade cooperation in the years ahead.
4. Beyond questions of institutional reform and geopolitical alignment, MC14 also raises fundamental issues about the purpose and impact of international trade. Trade has long been promoted as a pathway to economic growth and development, with the expectation that expanded trade would contribute to poverty reduction, job creation, and improved living standards. Yet, the inclusiveness of trade-driven growth remains contested. While global trade volumes have expanded significantly over recent decades, the benefits of trade have not been evenly distributed, either within or across countries. For many communities, particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups, the promised development gains of trade liberalization have remained elusive.

5. There is growing recognition of the need to better align trade policy with broader development objectives, including poverty reduction, gender equality, human rights, and disability inclusion. However, in practice, trade growth has often remained the dominant objective, sometimes at the expense of these wider social and development considerations. As a result, a persistent disconnect has emerged between the intended development impacts of trade policies and the lived realities of those most affected by economic adjustment, labor market disruptions, and unequal access to opportunities.

6. Recent global trade turbulence has further intensified these challenges. Various conflicts, climate-related shocks, and geopolitical conflicts have exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and highlighted the uneven capacity of countries to respond to crises. At the same time, emerging trade-related issues such as environmental sustainability, climate measures, and labor standards are reshaping the trade agenda. While these issues reflect legitimate policy concerns, they also raise complex questions about inclusiveness, policy space, and the potential for new forms of exclusion, particularly for developing economies and marginalized producers.

6. Against this backdrop, **this event will examine the future of trade governance ahead of WTO MC14**. It will explore how progress, or lack thereof, on key negotiating areas may influence confidence in the multilateral trading system, and what this means for countries with differing economic structures and development priorities. The discussion will span core aspects of WTO reform, including rule-making, dispute settlement, development provisions, and institutional effectiveness, while also addressing how emerging issues are being incorporated into the trade governance framework.

7. Importantly, the event will also focus on the human and developmental dimensions of trade policy. By examining the gap between policy intentions and real-world outcomes, the discussion will highlight the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable groups that are often absent from high-level trade debates. Participants will consider how trade governance can be made more responsive to inclusive development goals, and what role countries, coalitions, and stakeholders can play in ensuring that the future trade system delivers broader and more equitable benefits.

8. By bringing together diverse perspectives, **this event aims to contribute to a more informed and nuanced conversation on what comes next for global trade after MC14**. It seeks to move beyond narrow assessments of negotiating outcomes to consider the longer-term implications for multilateralism, development, and global economic cooperation in a rapidly changing world.

9. Some of the outcomes of the event would be policy briefs, policy notes, etc., to be published by the RIS and IDS.

10. The roundtable discussion is being coordinated by Dr. Prabir De at RIS and Dr. Amrita Saha in IDS.