



Revitalising the multilateral trading system

Advocacy toolkit for business

14th WTO Ministerial Conference, Cameroon, March 2026

ENSURING CERTAINTY
AND PREDICTABILITY

PROMOTING FAIRNESS

REDUCING COST AND RISK

UNLOCKING GROWTH



It is decision time for the
World Trade Organization



**The cost of WTO
inaction is measurable:
5% permanent GDP
loss for developing
countries by 2030.**

The impact on developing economies of
WTO dissolution. A country-level analysis

ICC-Oxford Economics, 2025



Chris Southworth
Secretary General
ICC United Kingdom

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) is issuing an urgent call for action to World Trade Organization (WTO) Members as the multilateral trading system stands at a critical crossroads, requiring decisive action at the 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Cameroon in March 2026.

The UK government is going further, calling for the E-Commerce and Investment Facilitation for Development plurilateral agreements (Joint Statement Initiatives) to be incorporated into the WTO rulebook. More than 100 countries have negotiated these agreements, yet their adoption is being blocked largely by one member. The frustration is palpable. Enough is enough: a small minority should not be able to obstruct the majority's desire to make progress. This Ministerial Conference is decision time.

The WTO has faced repeated calls for reform. However, the lack of action and pace and trajectory of unilateral actions is raising an alarming prospect of a systemic collapse in the rules-based system if progress is not made. This is particularly important to the UK which is more trade dependent and exposed to external economic shocks than many other economies.

For the global business community, MC14 is a "lifesaver" opportunity to mobilise political will to salvage the rules-based system – and, in doing so, secure the jobs, investment and growth that every economy depends on. Preserving and strengthening the WTO is not a theoretical exercise — it is an urgent priority for sustainable development and shared prosperity for people and communities around the world.

At MC14, ministers have the opportunity to agree a timeframe for much needed reform. If this is not agreed, the trade system is certain to fracture further and risks and costs for business increase.

We support the ICC and UK government calls to action and urge Ministers at MC14 to be pragmatic and launch a formal, time-bound round of WTO reform negotiations, prioritising core systemic issues like decision-making and plurilaterals to unblock progress across the negotiating agenda. Ministers should also commit to making the Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions permanent.

In Cameroon, we want to see this announced with a commitment for reforms to be delivered by the WTO 15th Ministerial Conferences in 2028. The UK is well positioned to help facilitate this roadmap as G20 host in 2027. The UK has a vital role to play as a mid-power G7 economy and pragmatic trade partner to other nations, especially across the global South. It is within our gift to work together and make a concerted effort to help de-escalate tensions, stabilise the system and importantly re-vitalise it to ensure the system is fit for the 21st century.

FACTSHEET

There are many misconceptions about the WTO. The following facts and figures are intended to help raise awareness about the real picture.

166 members, representing 98% of global trade

72% of world goods trade still operates on Most Favoured Nation¹ (MFN) tariff rules

US is 13% of global trade — 87% of world trade functions as normal

HIDDEN VALUE OF THE WTO²

WTO rules in areas such as customs valuation, technical barriers to trade (TBT), sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS), trade facilitation, or intellectual property protection facilitate global trade daily

The WTO facilitates investment flows by securing predictable market conditions for services trade in all sectors

The WTO protects innovation and intellectual property. The TRIPS Agreement guarantees baseline legal protection for patents, trademarks and copyrights worldwide, encouraging R&D and global commercialisation

The WTO opens trillion-dollar procurement markets. The Government Procurement Agreement (GPA) grants non-discriminatory access to public contracts worth US\$1.7 trillion annually, creating opportunities for domestic and foreign firms alike.

The WTO provides for enforceability of obligations leading to high levels of overall compliance among 166 members — even as work continues to address the current challenges in the dispute settlement mechanism.

The WTO delivers actionable business intelligence. WTO transparency tools and data platforms convert governmental notifications into practical market intelligence, enabling both policymakers and businesses — especially MSMEs — to make informed, data-driven decisions

AGREEMENTS

2013 Trade Facilitation Agreement (166 governments) has resulted in 70-80% of global customs being digitalised³, making cross border trade cheaper, faster and simpler

2025 Fisheries Subsidies Agreement (166 governments) will reduce over-fishing and protect fish stocks worldwide

2024 Ecommerce Agreement covers 80% of world trade (91 governments) and will remove friction, reduce costs and help deliver an open, interoperable digital environment for trade⁴

2024 Domestic Services Regulation Agreement covers 90% of world services trade (70 governments) and will remove barriers to accessing new markets

- Cutting trade costs by 10% in low to middle income economies and 14% in upper-middle income economies
- Generating global savings of US\$127 billion

"WTO rules in areas such as customs valuation, technical barriers to trade (TBT), sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS), trade facilitation, or intellectual property protection facilitate global trade daily."

2024 Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) covers 80% of world trade (127 governments) and will reduce barriers to investment flows⁵

- Boosting investment to close the US\$4 trillion
- Driving up to 1% global GDP growth in the long run
- Potential to generate between US\$295 billion and just over \$1 trillion in global welfare gains, with most accruing to low- and middle-income countries

STABILISING GLOBAL TRADE

114 trade ministers, representing 80% of world trade have made firm, supportive statements on the value of the WTO and multilateral trading system — representing APEC, ASEAN, The Commonwealth and Europe

There have been some reciprocal tariffs in response to the US but no global tariff war

Many WTO members are diversifying their trading partners to build greater resilience in their supply chains (e.g. UK-India FTA, UK and Canada's sectoral trade and market access agreements with China, EU-Mercosur FTA, EU-India FTA, etc)

FOR UK BUSINESS, THE BENEFITS OF THE WTO INCLUDE:

- » Cutting import costs 40% and export costs 90%
- » Saving UK retail consumers £500m in costs on the high street

FOR UK BUSINESS, THE BENEFITS OF TRADE DIGITALISATION INCLUDE:

- » Cutting trade transaction costs 80%
- » Cutting trade transaction times from average 2-3 months to 1 hour
- » Reducing cross border processing times 80%
- » Eliminating courier costs and postal delays
- » Improving workforce productivity 60%



UK call to action

For the UK, WTO reform matters. The UK is a trading nation where 60% of GDP relies on international trade, 60% of the nation's food is imported, 40% of the nation's energy is imported and the economy is uniquely exposed to external shocks as an open, financial global market. A rules-based, predictable global trading system is the backbone of prosperity.

As a founding member of the WTO and member of the Joint Statement Initiatives, the UK Government is going beyond the ICC Call to Action and calling for:

1

Modernisation of the WTO rulebook for digital trade by incorporating the WTO Agreement on E-Commerce into the multilateral framework, using it as a building block for more ambitious action.

2

Incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement into the WTO framework, recognising its importance in improving transparency, reducing investment barriers, and supporting sustainable development, particularly in developing and least-developed countries.

Together with ICC United Kingdom and our members, we can help shape a more inclusive, sustainable, and future-ready global economy. The opportunity is to:

- » **Lead by example** — be a pragmatic, inclusive and solutions focused voice for the trading system and inspire others to do the same
- » **Unify UK trade advocacy as “Team GB”** — strengthen coordination between government and industry across the WTO, G7, G20 and Commonwealth
- » **Mobilise business voices** — engage more companies to champion the rules-based trading system and promote a positive, constructive vision for the future of trade
- » **Drive reform** — press for concrete outcomes at MC14 in Cameroon and ensure delivery by MC15
- » **Deliver on commitments** — remove market access barriers, digitalise trade, enable investment, and support MSMEs
- » **Unlock services trade** — push for progress in a sector now accounting for over 50% of global trade once services in goods are counted



The role of the UK



The UK plays a unique role in the global trading system as a pragmatic champion of rules-based, open trade and major centre for diplomacy, finance, law, technology and innovation.

Founding member of the existing rules-based system

80% of global trade and 60% of global trade finance is conducted on English law

Second largest services economy

Third largest ecommerce market

Deep relationships with the global community as a member of G7, G20, The Commonwealth, OECD, WTO, World Customs Organization and United Nations

Seen as a 'go-to' country at the WTO for problem solving and bridging dialogue between the large and small economies

The voice of UK industry is highly respected

Member of MPIA for WTO dispute settlement⁶

GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES IN THE 2025 TRADE STRATEGY⁷

The UK is committed to working with international partners on the reform and repositioning of the global trading system. The UK will use its seat and voice to support the WTO in transforming itself, to the benefit of all 166 Members. The government wants to see a WTO that:

- » agrees new rules to meet the challenges of today's world, starting with tackling some of the market distorting practices, including the use of subsidies leading to overcapacity, that we know are undermining trust in the system as a whole
- » resolves disagreements more efficiently and whose rulings are accepted and respected
- » is trusted for the transparency with which its Members conduct themselves and can challenge effectively where such transparency may be seen to fall short engenders confidence across all Members that it can reposition itself now and bake in the processes to enable it to do so in the future



ICC global call to action

The multilateral trading system is at a critical crossroads. Unilateral actions, rising trade barriers, and systemic dysfunction are undermining trade, jobs and investment. Business needs stability, not systemic collapse. Preserving and strengthening the multilateral trading system is an urgent priority for economic development and shared prosperity for all countries and businesses, especially micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs).

ICC is the voice for business at multilateral level, representing 45 million companies of all sizes and sectors in 170 countries.

ICC IS CALLING ON MINISTERS TO:

1

Launch formal reform negotiations at MC14 with a concrete, time-bound work programme, prioritising cross-cutting systemic issues, such as plurilateral agreements, decision-making and Special and Differential Treatment, to unblock other negotiation items (e.g., industrial subsidies, digital trade, services, agriculture, etc.). If consensus is elusive, a coalition of willing Members including the UK should lead the way forward.

2

Define the reform negotiating agenda around business community priorities, including creating standing consultative mechanisms with businesses that are consistent with practices adopted in other international organisations and updating the rulebook.

3

Ensure structured private sector engagement as an integral part of the reform process, leveraging the expertise of businesses as the end users of the trading system. Explore “variable geometry” solutions, including differentiated membership types to accommodate diverse member positions while preserving systemic integrity.

4

Commit to a standstill on new trade-restrictive measures that violate WTO rules or improve a member’s position during reform negotiations.

5

Maintain the WTO Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions.

Key advocacy messages

The WTO anchors the global trading system. It provides the legal and institutional framework that connects thousands of national regulations, standards and trade practices into a single, coherent system — a safeguard no bilateral deal can replicate.

The scope of the WTO is comprehensive. It covers both trade in goods and services, with services alone representing two-thirds of global GDP, as well as the protection of intellectual property rights.

The WTO's real strength is practical and systemic. Beyond headline tariff deals, it delivers the quiet, technical work that underpins market certainty and keeps global commerce functioning daily for governments and businesses of all sizes, in every economy.

Tactical trade deals cannot provide the stability and predictability needed to ensure resilient supply chains and business growth.

A fragmented multilateral trading system risks shutting out small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through rising costs, opaque regulation and persistent uncertainty. Clearer guidance on policy implementation is essential to ensure businesses — particularly SMEs — are not damaged by red tape.

Legitimate concerns need to be addressed, but unilateral trade actions rooted in those concerns are putting the multilateral trading system at risk.

The breakdown of the multilateral trading system would have devastating consequences for development, particularly at a time when development assistance is being rolled back or reassigned. ICC data indicates that developing countries could face a 33% drop in non-fuel exports over five years, with some experiencing export losses as high as 45% and permanent GDP losses over 5%.⁸

Some issues can only be solved multilaterally. Complex problems such as subsidies or cross-border data rules cannot be effectively managed through bilateral or regional deals alone. This results in fragmented and divergent regulations that inhibit trade. Only the WTO provides a global framework to address them collectively and fairly.



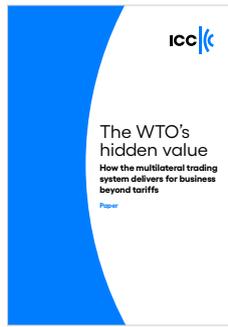


Resources

WTO AND THE MULTILATERAL TRADING SYSTEM



Revitalising the multilateral trading system: Call for action
ICC, 2025



The WTO's hidden value: How the multilateral trading system delivers for business beyond tariffs
ICC, 2025



ICC Compact for Trade, Growth and Jobs
ICC, 2025



The impact on developing economies of WTO dissolution. A country-level analysis
ICC and Oxford Economics, 2025



The impact on developing economies of WTO dissolution. A regional analysis
ICC and Oxford Economics, 2024

MOST FAVOURED NATION (MFN) PRINCIPLE⁹



Why the most-favoured nation principle matters for business
ICC, 2025

Get involved! What business can do



We must be practical if we want to positively influence the system and not leave it to others to make the case for a global trading system that we rely on for our own prosperity. Below are some practical tips on how to do this.

ENGAGE

Business diplomacy matters! Show up and engage in the WTO in Geneva where decisions about our future prosperity are being made. There are lots of influencers in the system who are open to constructive ideas and accessible. These include:

Department for Business and Trade (DBT)

DBT should be the first point of contact. It has a dedicated multilateral trade team focusing on the WTO, which can be reached at: WTODeliveryHub@businessandtrade.gov.uk

UK Mission in Geneva led by Ambassador Kumar Iyer CMG

The UK benefits from one of the best and most highly respected teams in the WTO. Engaging here ensures our voice is communicated to the global trade community and helps shape the system. ICC United Kingdom facilitates regular briefing callswith the UK Mission to update members on developments at the WTO.

General Council (Chair — Saudi Arabia)

The General Council is the WTO's main decision-making body, acting on behalf of the Ministerial Conference between its biennial meetings. It is composed of representatives from all member governments, handles day-to-day business and also convenes as the [Dispute Settlement Body](#) and [Trade Policy Review Body](#).

Committee on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) (Chair — UK)

The TBT Committee is responsible for implementing the TBT Agreement by discussing technical regulations, standards, and conformity assessment procedures for goods to prevent them from becoming unnecessary obstacles to trade. Its core functions include providing a forum for members to raise [Specific Trade Concerns](#), monitoring the agreement's implementation through annual reviews and notifications, and facilitating transparency and cooperation on TBT matters.

Informal Working Group on MSMEs (Chair — Barbados)

The Informal Working Group on MSMEs consists of 91 WTO members and provides a forum to identify and address obstacles to MSME participation in international trade.

Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on Ecommerce (Co-Chairs — Australia, Japan, Singapore)

The JSI on Ecommerce brings together over 90 members working to negotiate global rules for digital trade. The group aims to make online commerce more open, secure, and predictable by tackling issues like data flows, paperless trading, and consumer protection.

Trade and Environment Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD) (Convenors — Canada and Costa Rica)

The TESSD brings together more than 70 members to explore how trade can support environmental goals. The group focuses on issues like climate action, sustainable supply chains, and reducing trade barriers to green goods and services.

Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group (Coordinator — The Gambia)

The LDC Consultative Group is a forum for least developed countries in the WTO to identify topics of mutual interest, coordinate positions and feed these into WTO Secretariat decision making. This group plays a key role in shaping outcomes.

WTO Public Forum

The annual WTO Public Forum is the world's largest platform for dialogue on global trade, bringing together governments, business, civil society, and academia to discuss the most pressing challenges and opportunities. UK businesses can engage by showcasing solutions, joining discussions on trade policy, and networking with international stakeholders to shape the future of global commerce.

PROVIDE EVIDENCE

Too often decisions are poorly informed because industry isn't putting forward practical examples of how things can work better. Put forward the positive case for how the rules-based system benefits your company.

Provide practical case studies to show how solutions are meeting the needs of all economies.

SECURING SUPPORT FOR PATENT PROTECTION

ICC United Kingdom, the Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys (CIPA) and the Intellectual Property (IP) Federation have joined forces to demystify IP for policymakers and negotiators, and to make the case for a strong and balanced IP system — particularly patents — in supporting innovative businesses worldwide. The partnership has published two reports featuring powerful case studies from the UK, Colombia and Kenya, which highlight the positive impact that IP can have on future innovation and a more sustainable world. The first report was launched at a special session at the World Intellectual Property Organization. This is a best-in-class collaboration, and more business-led initiatives of this kind are needed.



PARTICIPATE IN WTO DELEGATIONS

Our engagement matters! Participate in UK delegations. ICC United Kingdom works with the government and all UK business organisations to help strengthen our collective voice. We coordinate some of the largest delegations to the WTO and are much admired by the rest of the world in the way we work with government and are inspiring other countries to play a constructive role. Working together means we can amplify our voice and impact.

INVITE WTO MISSIONS TO VISIT

Inviting policy makers to see real-world trade and trade finance operations in action is a simple way of helping improve understanding of how the system works, what can be improved and how they can help.

EVENTS

Ensure speakers represent all corners of the world — North, South, East, West. Advocating the needs of a G7 economy has little impact in the WTO if what we are advocating doesn't demonstrate how it works for others.





LEVERAGE THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth ambition is to increase intra-Commonwealth trade to \$2 trillion by 2030 and to digitalise trade. The Commonwealth is a growing network that includes anglophone, francophone and lusophone countries but is, too often, under-leveraged.

Commonwealth laws underpin 80% of world trade and 60% of global trade finance. It includes some of the leading innovators in world trade in the likes of Australia, Kenya, Singapore and UK and includes 3 of the 6 major trade finance and logistics hubs across the main artery of global trade — Maritime Silk Route and Transatlantic Trade Route.

The Commonwealth is a microcosm of the WTO that includes some of the most advanced economies but also two of the most trade burdened regions in the Pacific and Caribbean. If solutions work for the Commonwealth, there is a good chance they work for everyone.

The Commonwealth is a unique network of 56 countries that:

- » Connect five continents and regional trade blocs
- » Represent 20% of G7, 25% of G20, 34% of the WTO
- » Is the largest diplomatic representation of Africa, outside Africa
- » Start with a 21% average trade cost advantage based on shared language, legal systems, institutions and business practices



References

- 1 The WTO's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle means that if a country gives a special trade deal to one trading partner — like lowering tariffs on certain goods — it must give the same deal to all other WTO members.

- 2 ICC, The WTO's hidden value: How the multilateral trading system delivers for business beyond tariffs, 2025

- 3 UNESCAP Paperless Trade Framework Initiative, 2025

- 4 Department for Business and Trade and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Press release, UK joins groundbreaking global digital trade agreement, July 2024

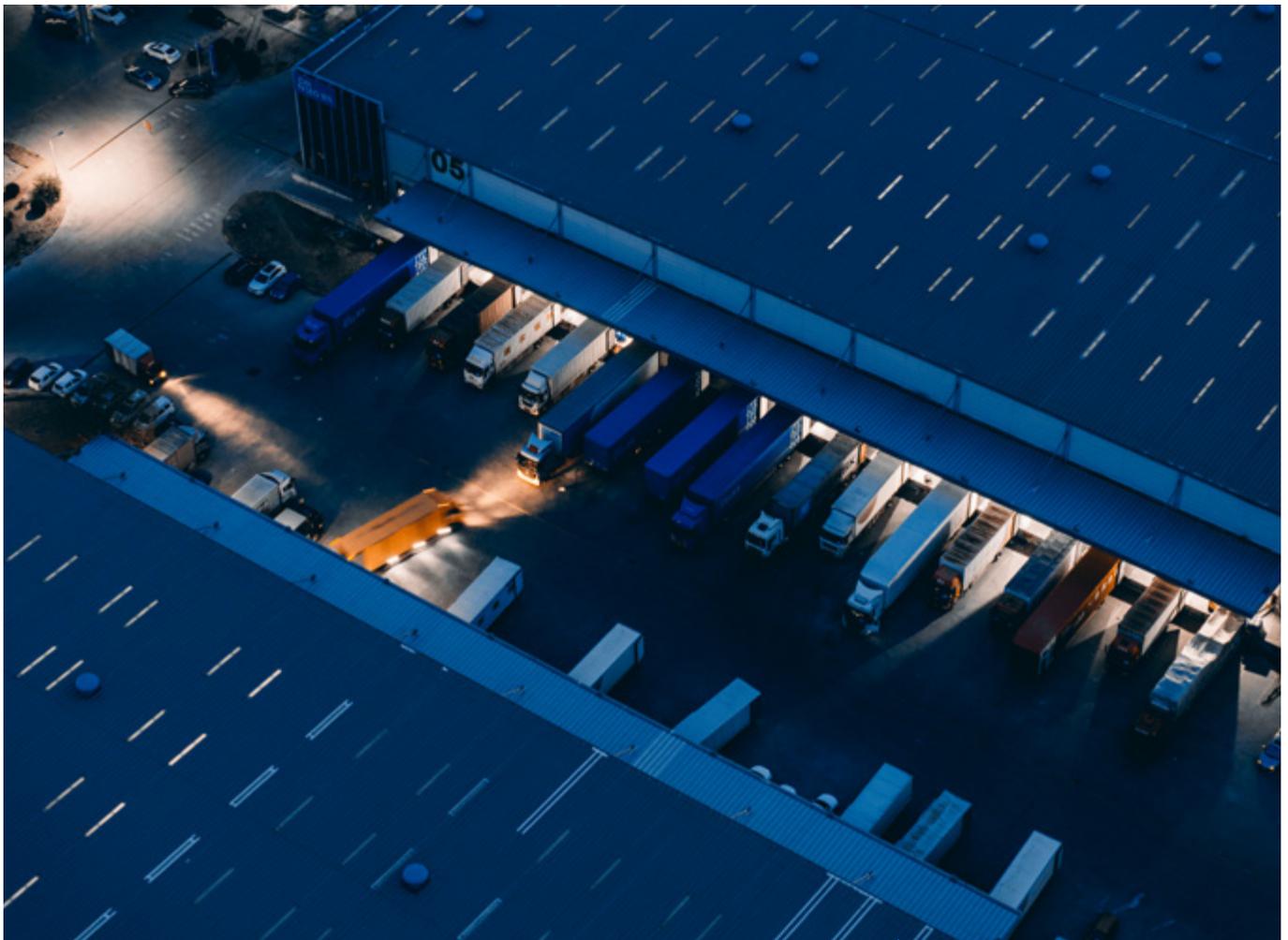
- 5 German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), 2024

- 6 The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) is a temporary system that lets countries appeal WTO trade rulings while the WTO's usual appeals court isn't working. Around 50+ WTO members take part in it.

- 7 UK Government, The UK's Trade Strategy, June 2025

- 8 ICC-Oxford Economics 2024

- 9 See note one above





#WeAreICC

ICC is the world's largest business organisation representing 45 million companies with 1 billion employees in over 170 countries.

The International Chamber of Commerce is the only business organization with UN Observer Status and acts as a leading voice for business at the UN, G7, G20, World Trade Organization and other major international institutions.

ICC United Kingdom is the representative voice for ICC in the UK and provides a mechanism for UK industry to engage effectively in shaping international policy, standards and rules. We are the leading voice on digital trade ecosystems, act as the ICC representative to The Commonwealth and Co-Chair the B2B Cluster for the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda.

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