

SDG 17: Partnerships for Trade and Development

“The WTO remains a source of stability and resilience in an economic and geopolitical landscape fraught with uncertainties and exogenous shocks. Trade remains a vital force for improving people’s lives, and for helping businesses and countries cope with the impact of these shocks.

WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, MC13 Closing Ceremony, March 2024 (WTO, 2024e)

The 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13), held in Abu Dhabi from 26 February to 2 March 2024, brought together nearly 4,000 delegates to address critical challenges facing the global trading system. This chapter examines the key outcomes of MC13, acknowledging the cross-cutting nature of trade as a means to implement the SDGs and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while highlighting how these outcomes contribute to the advancement of various SDGs.

A central achievement of MC13 was the adoption of the Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration³⁶, which recalled the objectives set forth in the Marrakesh Agreement and recognized the vital role the multilateral trading system can play in contributing towards the achievement of the UN 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, as they relate to the WTO mandate. The Declaration underscored the importance of integrating trade with sustainable development across its three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. By acknowledging these pillars, the WTO members emphasized the necessity of promoting inclusive economic growth, fostering social development, and ensuring environmental sustainability through trade.

Furthermore, the Declaration reaffirms the commitment of WTO members to a robust and rules-based multilateral trading system, aligning with SDG target 17.10, which promotes a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory, and equitable trading system under the WTO. Strengthening the WTO fosters a stable and predictable trading environment, crucial for economic growth and development (SDG 8, “Decent Work and Economic Growth”). This comprehensive approach ensures that trade policies are not only geared towards economic advancement, but also contribute to broader social and environmental objectives, reinforcing the WTO’s commitment to sustainable development.

Trade as a tool for development

At MC13, ministers adopted a Ministerial Declaration to review special and differential treatment provisions for developing economies and LDCs, with a view to making these provisions more precise, effective and operational³⁷. This decision focused on addressing some of the challenges identified in the Agreement on the Application of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT). This decision contributes to the achievement of SDG 1 (“No Poverty”), SDG 8 (“Decent Work and Economic Growth”) and SDG 10 (“Reduced inequalities”) by fostering inclusivity and supporting the participation of developing economies in the global trading system.

Ministers at MC13 recognized the potential of trade to contribute to broader SDGs. For the first time, ministers engaged in discussions on how trade can support sustainable development and socioeconomic inclusion, in line with the UN 2030 Agenda principle of “leaving no one behind”, as well as SDG 10 (“Reduced Inequalities”). These discussions included empowering women in trade, aligning with SDG 5 (“Gender Equality”), and supporting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), aligning with SDG 8 (“Decent Work and Economic Growth”). This engagement lays the groundwork for future WTO initiatives that integrate trade policies with broader development goals.

Members also adopted a Ministerial Decision on concrete measures to ease the path to graduation from the category of LDCs³⁸. The MC13 outcome on LDC graduation reflects members’ willingness to support LDCs by providing them with three years to adjust to WTO rules and disciplines, as well as access to LDC-specific technical assistance.

This decision came just a few months after the WTO General Council adopted a decision to extend support measures for economies graduating from LDC status, which called for members to provide a smooth and sustainable transition period to graduating LDCs for the withdrawal of access to duty-free and quota-free preference programmes.³⁹ These two decisions highlight a timely and responsive approach to addressing the key priorities identified by LDCs, thus contributing to the achievement of SDG 10 ("Reduced Inequalities") and its target 10.a on implementing the principle of special and differential treatment for developing economies, in particular LDCs.

The Ministerial Conference also witnessed progress on several environmental initiatives. Momentum grew for the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, with South Africa joining the growing list of members to have presented instruments of acceptance to the Director-General. For the Agreement to become operational, two-thirds of members have to deposit their instruments of acceptance with the WTO. This Agreement prohibits harmful subsidies that contribute to overfishing, directly aligning with SDG 14 ("Life Below Water"). Discussions also advanced on tackling plastics pollution (which aligns with SDG 12, "Responsible Consumption and Production") and fossil fuel subsidy reforms, which contributes to SDG 13 ("Climate Action").

Furthermore, MC13 advanced progress on dispute settlement reform. A Ministerial Decision outlines a path towards a fully functional system by 2024,⁴⁰ with a view to promoting a more predictable and transparent trading environment (SDG 16, "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions").

MC13 also saw the entry into force of new disciplines on services domestic regulation, which is expected to reduce trade costs by over

US\$ 125 billion worldwide. This initiative is designed to facilitate trade in services, promoting economic growth (SDG 8, "Decent Work and Economic Growth"). In addition, ministers representing 123 WTO members issued a Joint Ministerial Declaration marking the finalization of the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement, signifying progress toward improving the global trade and investment environment for development (SDG 8).

Included among the topics of a Ministerial Conversation during MC13 were trade and industrial policy and policy space for industrial development, contributing to a better understanding on how to advance in the achievement of SDGs 9 ("Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure") and SDG 10 ("Reduced Inequalities").

Ministers adopted a Ministerial Decision on electronic commerce⁴¹, instructing the General Council to hold periodic reviews on the E-commerce Work Programme and maintain the current practice of not imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions until MC14 or 31 March 2026, whichever is earlier. These discussions and decisions contribute to the targets of promoting a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory, and equitable multilateral trading system (SDG 17, "Partnerships for the Goals") and fostering innovation and technological advancements (SDG 9, "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure").

Despite the difficult geopolitical context, and although challenges remain to be resolved in areas such as agriculture and fisheries subsidies negotiations, MC13 nevertheless stands as a testament to the WTO's commitment to the multilateral trading system and sustainable development. The groundwork laid during this conference positions the international community to make substantial progress in achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.