



RIS Discussion Paper # 332

WTO Agriculture Negotiations: A Divided Landscape

Sachin Kumar Sharma, Talha Akbar Kamal,
Alisha Goswami, Yogeshwari Mahajan and
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Abstract: The multilateral trading system is facing growing institutional strain as the divergence between multilateral commitments and the trade policy practices of Members continues to widen. These tensions are particularly evident in the agriculture negotiations, where long-standing differences among Members have prevented meaningful progress despite repeated ministerial mandates. Agriculture remains a uniquely sensitive sector at the intersection of trade regulation, food security, and rural livelihoods, making reform complex. As the Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) approaches in Yaoundé, Cameroon, the persistent divergence among members positions in agricultural negotiations risks producing procedural continuity without substantive outcomes. In this context, the paper examines the reasons for the persistent impasse in WTO agriculture negotiations by exploring the divergent positions of Members within key pillars of agriculture negotiations along with the different approaches towards reform. It identifies two broad and competing approaches to the reform, shaped by differing sensitivities and socio-economic interests of Members. The first is a comprehensive approach, which seeks simultaneous progress across all negotiating pillars. The second is the sequential approach, which gives priority to long-standing mandated issues, notably Public Stockholding for food security purposes, the Special Safeguard Mechanism, and Cotton. By assessing recent developments across the key pillars of the agricultural negotiations, the paper further identifies the structural factors sustaining the deadlock and outlines potential pathways toward more credible, development-responsive outcomes in the lead-up to MC14.

Keywords: WTO Agriculture Negotiations; MC14 (Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference); Public Stockholding for Food Security (PSH); Domestic Support; Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM); Cotton.

1. Introduction

The multilateral trading system is undergoing a period of significant transition. Three decades after the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the institutional promise of a rules-based trade

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order is increasingly being tested by fragmentation in global economic governance and by a widening divergence between formal multilateral commitments and actual trade policy practice. This divergence is reflected not only in the growing use of unilateral trade measures (UN, 2026), but also in the limited capacity of the WTO to secure negotiated outcomes on issues of longstanding concern to developing Members. The result is a gradual weakening of confidence in the Organization's ability to translate negotiated mandates into effective and development responsive outcomes.

These structural strains are especially evident in the agriculture negotiations. Agriculture occupies a distinctive place within the WTO framework because it lies at the intersection of trade regulation, food security, rural livelihoods, and other development concerns. While this has long made agricultural reform particularly complex, the present impasse cannot be attributed to sectoral sensitivity alone. Although Members continue to acknowledge the importance of food security, the current state of negotiations reveals persistent differences over both substantive priorities and the appropriate framework for advancing reform. Divergent views on sequencing and process of the outcomes of the negotiating pillars, have slowed progress and limited the scope for convergence. As a result, the broader reform agenda has repeatedly been deferred, even as global food systems remain exposed to volatility, supply disruptions, and recurrent shocks.

A major reason for this continued deadlock is the failure to resolve long pending mandated issues. Over the course of successive Ministerial Conferences, Members have repeatedly identified certain agricultural concerns as deserving priority outcomes because of their direct relationship to food security and livelihood protection. Since the mid 2010s, the agriculture negotiations have yielded little by way of meaningful negotiated progress proportionate to the significance of the issues under discussion. Instead, Ministerial instructions have often been reaffirmed in general terms without being accompanied by the level of textual convergence necessary for resolution. This pattern has carried into the fourteenth Ministerial Conference (MC14), scheduled to take place from 26 to 29 March 2026 in Yaoundé, Cameroon (WTO, 2025d), at a

time when broader questions concerning the effectiveness and credibility of the WTO remain pressing.

Despite numerous proposals and sustained discussions in the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoA-SS), Members have not yet moved toward a consolidated negotiating text. In the absence of this convergence, there is a substantial risk that MC14 may reproduce the familiar pattern of procedural continuity without substantive outcome.

MC14 should therefore be understood as more than an ordinary Ministerial meeting. It represents an important test of the WTO's capacity to function as a member driven institution capable of delivering results on matters central to development. It will indicate whether Members are prepared to move beyond repeated reaffirmations and toward concrete outcomes that reflect the objectives of the agricultural negotiating mandates. It will also serve as an indicator of whether the multilateral trading system can continue to support wider global objectives, including progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 2 on zero hunger (UN, 2026), in a context where food insecurity remains persistent concerns across many regions.

Against this background, this chapter examines the contemporary landscape of the WTO agriculture negotiations and explains the reasons for their continued impasse. It analyses the principal areas of divergence across the core negotiating pillars, and differing approaches to reform process. It further considers the strategic implications of proposals and the continuing absence of a consolidated text in the lead up to MC14. On this basis, the chapter identifies a possible pathway toward more credible and development responsive outcomes.

2. Agricultural Issues: Main Pillars

At the WTO, agriculture negotiations take place in the CoA-SS, pursuant to Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). Article 20 sets out the long-term objective of achieving substantial progressive reductions in support and protection, while taking into account non-trade concerns such as food security and the need for Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) for developing Members.

The negotiations on the long-term reform process were initiated in early 2000, at the Doha Ministerial Conference, where, Ministers committed to comprehensive negotiations aimed at: substantial improvements in market access; reductions of, with a view to phasing out, all forms of export subsidies; and substantial reductions in trade-distorting domestic support. At the same time, due consideration was given to the development priorities of developing Members comprising non-trade concerns particularly food security and rural development along with S&DT. Consequently, issues such as food security, cotton, and the SSM gained prominence in the negotiations (Das, 2025).

Over time, the negotiating agenda in agriculture has gradually evolved. At present, discussions broadly encompass the following key pillars: public stockholding for food security purposes (PSH), domestic support, SSM, cotton, export restrictions, market access, export competition and transparency.

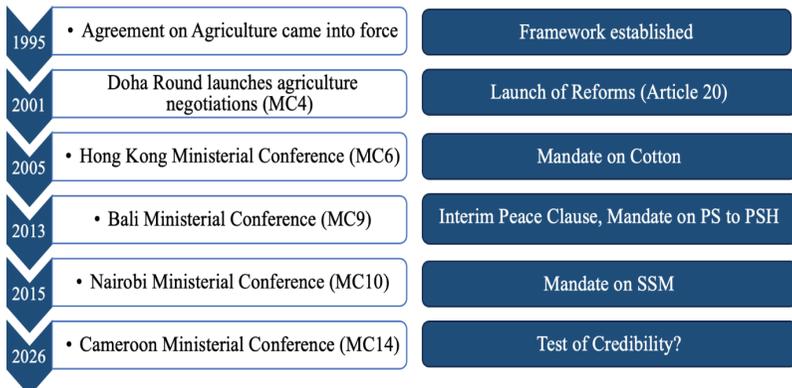
While the reform process includes negotiations on all issues, Ministerial Decisions over time have created a clear distinction between mandated and non-mandated issues.

3. Mandated Issues v/s Non-Mandated Issues

Mandated issues are those on which Ministers in the past Ministerial Conferences have explicitly accorded importance through ministerial decisions which guided Members to negotiate, distinct from other pillars. While non-mandated issues include all other pillars which are a part of the long-term reform process (Figure 1).

Under the Doha Work Programme, the General Council (GC) decision adopted on 1 August 2004 recognized the importance of cotton to developing countries, particularly least developed countries (LDCs). Given its vital role it was decided that the issue of cotton would be addressed “ambitiously, expeditiously, and specifically,” within the agriculture negotiations. This decision also states that “*The Special Session of the Committee on Agriculture shall ensure appropriate prioritization of the cotton issue independently from other sectoral initiatives.*” (WTO, 2004). The Hong Kong Ministerial declaration of

**Figure 1: Three Decades of WTO Agriculture Negotiations:
Mandates vs Outcomes**



Source: Authors' compilation based on WTO Ministerial Conferences

2005 (WTO, 2005b) reaffirmed this GC decision, and thus the issue of cotton became a mandated issue that was accorded priority. Subsequently, Bali and Nairobi Ministerial decisions reiterated this mandate.

Food security was reaffirmed as a major non-trade concern under the Doha Development Agenda (DDA). In this context, developing countries expressed concerns over shrinking policy space for ensuring domestic food security particularly with respect to implementing price support-based public stockholding (PSH) programmes for food security purposes. Recognising the importance of this issue, Ministers at the Bali Ministerial Conference (MC9) committed to negotiate a permanent solution to PSH by MC11 at the Buenos Aires. This commitment was strengthened through the November 2014 Decision of the WTO General Council (WTO, 2014). which recognised PSH as critical for food security and decided that negotiations on this issue shall be pursued on priority, in dedicated sessions and in an accelerated time-frame, distinct from the agriculture negotiations under the DDA. This mandate was reaffirmed at the 10th MC at the Nairobi, thereby consolidating a clear mandate for advancing a permanent solution on PSH.

Similarly, the Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration (2005), stated that Developing country Members will also have the right to have recourse to a Special Safeguard Mechanism. Further, the Nairobi Ministerial decision reaffirmed the right of developing country Members to a SSM and agreed “*To pursue negotiations on an SSM for developing country Members in dedicated sessions of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (“CoA-SS”).*” (WTO, 2015a).

The rationale behind granting these mandates arose from the need and sensitivity of these three issues. They carry direct implications for development needs of developing countries, including LDCs. Members recognized that waiting for comprehensive reforms across all pillars under Article 20 could significantly delay the outcomes on these issues.

Therefore, dedicated sessions were established to negotiations of these mandated issues in order to have focused attention and facilitating timely resolution of these priority concerns.

3.1. What is the Real Problem in the Reform Process?

The current stalemate in WTO agriculture negotiations arises from two closely linked challenges: differing approaches to the reform process and divergent positions across key pillars. These differences impede consensus-building, as Members differ not only on the substance of outcomes but also on the sequencing and process of securing these outcomes.

4. Approaches for Reform in Agriculture Negotiations: Comprehensive vs. Sequential

The first major issue of contention revolves around the process or sequencing to achieve outcomes on specific issues under agriculture negotiations at the WTO. At present, Members are broadly divided based on supporting two different approaches. The reason behind development of these two approaches is rooted in negotiating priorities of the Members.

4.1. The Comprehensive Approach: Reform Everything Together

Members supporting a comprehensive outcome argue that it reflects the spirit of the reform process under Article 20 of the AoA and is necessary to ensure balance across all pillars. In this approach, all issues are treated on equal footing, with progress in one area linked to outcomes in others. Accordingly, several Members, including certain Members of the Cairns Group, the United States and the European Union, advocate advancing negotiations across all pillars simultaneously.

Ahead of MC14, Brazil submitted a proposal on 5 December 2025 (WTO, 2025c), urging Members to work towards a comprehensive agricultural framework and to develop balanced modalities that reflect Members' interests and priorities.

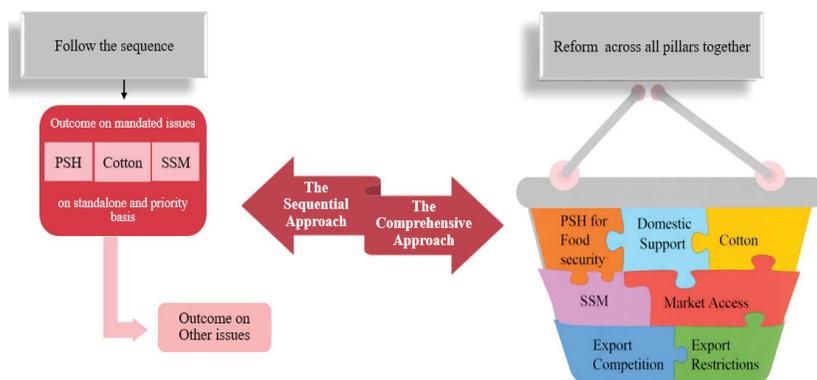
Proponents anchor this approach in Article 20 of the AoA, which provides the legal basis for continuing the reform process with the long-term objective of achieving substantial progressive reductions in support and protection. Accordingly, negotiations are understood to focus on: (i) reductions in domestic support and export subsidies under the domestic support and export competition pillars; and (ii) improved market access through reductions in protection. Non-trade concerns, special and differential treatment, and broader developmental objectives are to be considered within this framework.

4.2. The Sequential Approach: Deliver on Long Pending Mandated Issues First

According to the sequential approach, the issues which have received mandate from the past ministerial decisions should be accorded priority in delivering an outcome given the urgency, and importance of the issues. The developing and LDC members seek priority outcomes on long-pending mandated issues including PS to PSH, SSM and Cotton (Figure 2).

Proponents of this approach argue that if mandated issues are treated at par with other negotiating issues, it would mean a retraction of promises made by the Ministers, questioning the very nature and

Figure 2: Pillars Covered under the Comprehensive and Sequential Approach



Source: Based on WTO Proposals and Members stance in CoA-SS negotiations

structural importance of a Ministerial Conference as the highest decision-making arena of the WTO. In effect, it would mean jeopardizing WTO's basic functional structure.

5. Divergent Position Within Key Pillars

5.1. Domestic Support

Disciplining agricultural domestic support remains among the most contested aspects of the negotiations. While Members broadly agree on the need to address trade-distorting support, there is no consensus on how such support should be defined, nor on the modalities through which reforms should be implemented.

Domestic support under the AoA is generally grouped into four categories: the Green Box, Blue Box, Development Box, and Amber Box (Table 1). The Green Box (Annex 2, AoA) covers measures deemed to have no, or at most minimal, trade-distorting effects. The Blue Box (Article 6.5, AoA) permits certain direct payments linked to production-limiting programmes. The Development Box (Article 6.2, AoA) reflects Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) for developing country

Table 1: Classification of Domestic Support under AoA

Box	Type of support	Comments
Green Box (Annex 2)	No or minimal trade-distorting support	No financial limit and is available to all Members
Blue Box (Article 6.5)	Direct payments under production-limiting programmes	
Development Box (Article 6.2)	Investment subsidies Input subsidies to low-income or resource-poor producers, Support to diversify from illicit narcotic crops	No financial limit and is available only to developing Members including LDCs except China and Kazakhstan.
Amber Box (Article 6.3 & 6.4)	Product and non-product specific trade-distorting measures	All Members are subject to strict financial limits

Source: Authors' compilation based on the WTO Agreement on Agriculture

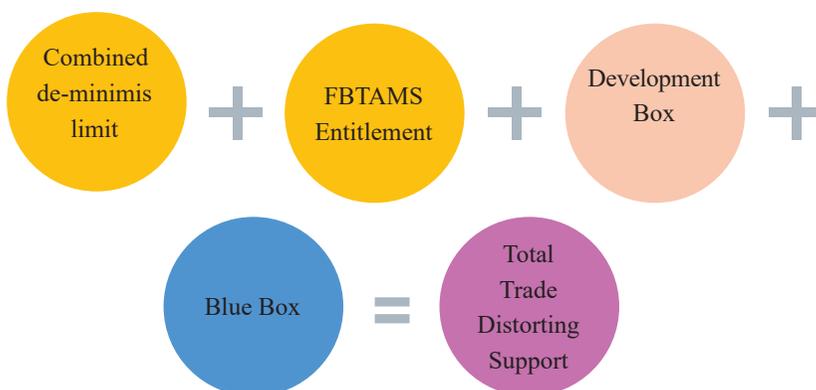
Members, allowing specified investment subsidies and input subsidies for low-income or resource-poor producers. These three categories are not subject to monetary caps under the AoA. In contrast, the Amber Box measures cover the most trade-distorting forms of domestic support and thus subject to financial cap up to a certain limit called the *de minimis* limit. It is broadly divided into product-specific support (PSS) and non-product specific support (NPS). PSS refers to the measures that are targeted towards specific products such as rice, wheat, milk etc. in the form of price support, deficiency payments, and budgetary support. Any general trade-distorting support such as input subsidies falls under NPS as these are not targeted to producers of a specific product. A developed Member can provide at least 5 percent of the value of production (VoP) of a concerned product as PSS, and 5 percent of the VoP of total agriculture as NPS during a relevant year, whereas for the developing Members this *de minimis* limit is 10 percent of the VoP (Sharma et.al.,

2024a). In addition, 33 Members, predominantly developed Members, have Final Bound Total Aggregate Measurement of Support (FBTAMS) entitlements (Brink & Orden, 2023). These entitlements reflect support notified above *de minimis* in the 1986-1988 base period or through accession commitments, providing additional policy space to provide support beyond *de minimis* limits (Sharma, et. al, 2021).

Currently, more than 95 percent of global FBTAMS entitlements are concentrated among developed Members, notably the European Union, United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

In recent years, some members of the Cairns Group have proposed to reform the domestic support by advocating for a ‘proportionate reduction’ approach (Sharma et al., 2022 and 2023). Their concern is that global TTDS entitlements have increased significantly and could reach nearly US\$ 2 trillion by 2030 (WTO, 2019). These members are apprehensive of this upward trend in trade-distorting subsidy as they can cause heavy distortions in the agriculture market, and moreover undermine sustainability and climate goals (Figure 3). Notably, few

Figure 3: Covered Support under Cairns Group Proportionate Methodology for Disciplining Trade Distorting Support



Source: Based on Cairns Group Proposal “Building a Comprehensive Approach to Negotiations on Domestic Support. (JOB/AG/243/Rev.2), 2024

Table 2: Members Position on Domestic Support Reform

Group	Position	Key Demand
Cairns Group*	Supports Comprehensive approach	Proportionate TTDS cuts
United States	Supports Comprehensive approach	Reform domestic support + market access
European Union	Supports Comprehensive approach	No cap on Green Box payments
African Group	Supports Sequential approach	Eliminate FBTAMS entitlement + Cap Green Box direct payments
India along with certain G33 members and other developing Members	Supports Sequential approach	Eliminate FBTAMS, preserve S&DT

Source: Members position based on stance in Committee on Agriculture Special Session

*Note**: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Malaysia, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, Thailand, Uruguay and Viet Nam.

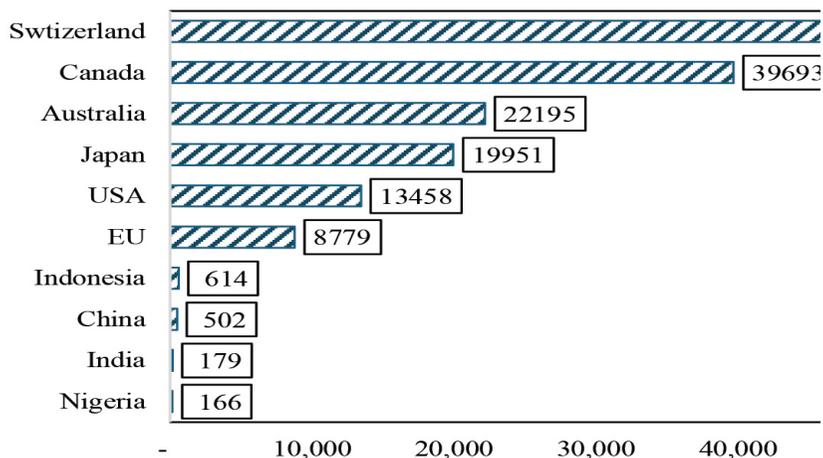
members such as Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, and New Zealand assert that the upward trend in TTDS flexibility is mainly on account of the combined *de minimis* limits under the Amber Box. This argument is based on the reasoning that developing and developed country members are entitled to 20 and 10 percent of the VoP respectively under the combined *de minimis* limit, which comprises aggregated product-specific, and non-product-specific *de minimis* support. Therefore, to address the issue of rising trade distorting subsidies, certain Carins group members have put forward a proposal that seeks proportionate methodology for disciplining trade distorting support (WTO 2023b, 2024).

- First, the global base TTDS is to be determined by summing up the trade-distorting domestic support provided by all members in a fixed base year.

- Second, this base global TTDS needs to be reduced by 50 percent by 2034.
- Third, this target is to be achieved by reducing members' individual TTDS entitlements, and the reduction should be proportional to the size of the member's TTDS entitlement in the base year (Figure 4).
- Fourth, the reduced TTDS entitlement will serve as the upper limit for the members to provide support under the Amber box including the *de minimis* limit, Blue box, and Development box.

Several developed Members, particularly the United States and the European Union, broadly support comprehensive approach particularly Cairns Group proportionate methodology to discipline trade-distorting domestic support (Table 2). However, differences remain on the scope of reforms. The African Group has proposed capping direct payments under the Green Box for developed Members, arguing that such support can still distort trade (WTO, 2023c). The EU opposes this proposal, maintaining

Figure 4: Per Farmer Support based on Proposed TTDS Limit for Selected Countries (US\$), 2040



Source: Authors' calculation based on FAOSTAT Value of Production data and employment data from ILOSTAT

that Green Box measures are minimally trade-distorting and should not be subject to additional disciplines. The United States also supports disciplining domestic support but argues that reforms should be part of a broader agriculture package that includes significant tariff reductions under the market access pillar (WTO, 2023a, 2023g), an area where the EU remains highly sensitive.

Meanwhile, the G-10 Members, including Japan, South Korea, Norway, and Switzerland, have expressed strong reservations about steep reductions in their domestic support flexibility. Several Members, such as the EU, Norway, Japan, Iceland, and China, have also used Blue Box support and seek to retain this policy instrument. On the other hand, several developing Members, including India, Indonesia, and China, oppose the proportionate reduction approach, arguing that it would shrink their already limited policy space and weaken Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT). Instead, they advocate addressing structural imbalances in the AoA by first eliminating FBTAMS entitlements (WTO, 2017, 2023f). In this regard, India and China have tabled joint proposal seeking elimination of AMS entitlements and argue that any future reductions in domestic support should be assessed on a per-farmer or per-capita basis while preserving S&DT provisions.

Therefore, eliminating the historically asymmetric FBTAMS entitlements is the essential precondition to ensure that all Members, developed and developing, are ultimately subject to comparable limits of support. Proponents argue that broader and further disciplines on domestic support can only be credibly negotiated once this fundamental imbalance is addressed.

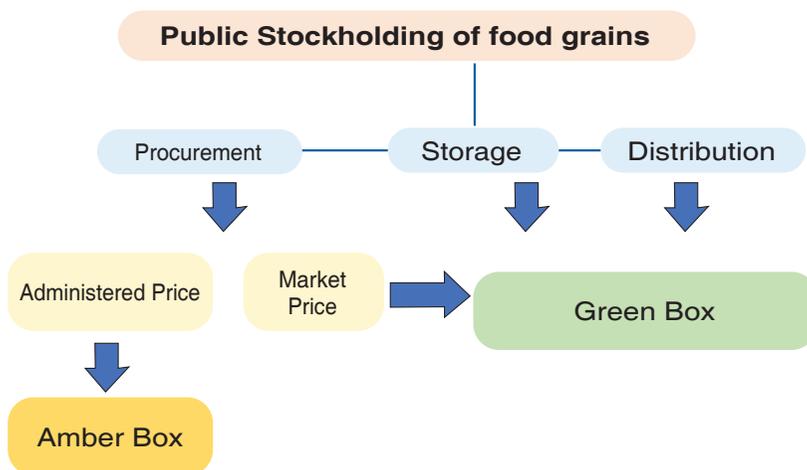
5.2. Permanent Solution to Public Stockholding for Food Security Purposes

Global hunger remains a defining challenge of our time. FAO estimates indicate that between 638 and 720 million people faced hunger in 2024, placing the world far off track from achieving SDG 2 of Zero Hunger. Against this backdrop, the question of how multilateral trade rules accommodate government efforts to feed their populations has assumed

enormous significance, and nowhere is this tension more visible than in the ongoing negotiations over public stockholding (PSH) for food security purposes at the WTO (Figure 5).

PSH programmes involve the procurement, storage, and release of food stocks by governments to maintain food security and provide livelihood support to vulnerable producers (Figure 6). Across many developing countries, these programmes serve a dual purpose: guaranteeing farmers a remunerative price and ensuring that food grains reach the poor at affordable prices (FAO, 2021a) For instance, in India, the Food Corporation of India, procures foodgrains at minimum support prices and distributes them to over 810 million people under the National Food Security Act of 2013. Similar mechanisms operate through China’s SINOGRain and Indonesia’s BULOG, reflecting the widespread reliance on price support backed stockholding as an instrument of ensuring domestic food security and safeguarding farmers livelihood (FAO, 2021b).

Figure 5: Categorisation of Support Provided for PSH Programme under the AoA



Source: Authors’ compilation based on AoA, WTO

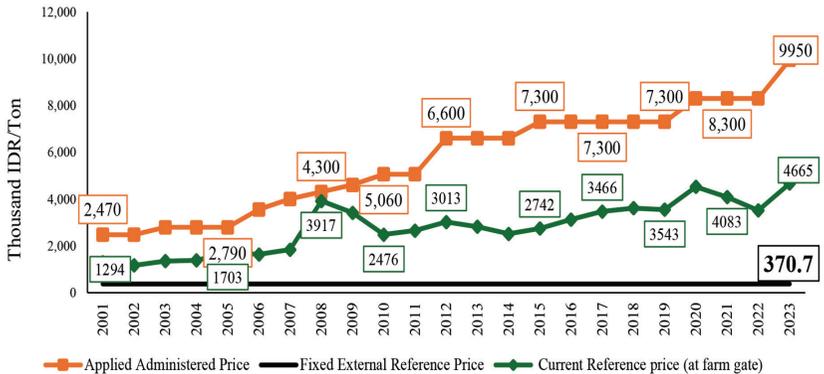
A legal problem, however, arises from the way the AoA classifies and calculates such support (Figure 5). Expenditures on storage, distribution and procurement at current market prices are generally accommodated under the Green Box. The difficulty emerges when governments procure at administered prices rather than at prevailing market prices. In such cases, the resulting support is treated as market price support and categorized under Amber Box disciplines. The methodology for calculating the market price support is particularly problematic as it compares the applied administered price with an external reference price based on average prices from 1986 to 1988.

$MPS = (AAP - ERP) * Q$; where AAP is the Applied Administered Price.

ERP stands for Fixed External Reference Price based on export or import price prevailing during the base period (1986-88) while Q is the eligible production.

This produces a deeply distorted result: current administered prices are measured against a fixed and outdated benchmark, inflating the level of support. For most developing Members, the 10 percent *de minimis* limit, coupled with an outdated external reference price, has significantly curtailed the policy space available to sustain price support-based PSH programmes for ensuring domestic food security. Developing countries began raising concerns about these constraints in the early 2000s and submitted various proposals for seeking flexibility to ensure domestic food security. This culminated in an interim arrangement commonly known as the Bali Peace Clause at the ninth Ministerial Conference (WTO, 2013). Under this arrangement, the PSH programmes for food security purposes of developing country members are shielded from legal challenge if they provide support beyond their domestic support commitments. The General Council extended this protection to perpetuity in November 2014, and the Tenth Ministerial Conference at Nairobi in 2015 reaffirmed the mandate, directing that dedicated negotiating sessions in the CoA-SS proceed on an accelerated basis, separate from the broader agriculture negotiations (WTO, 2015c).

Figure 6: Comparison of Dynamic Reference Price and AAP of Indonesian Rice with ERP



Source: Fixed ERP and MSP are based on (1) Indonesia’s domestic support notification; (2) Current External Reference Price extracted from OECD database.

Despite successive ministerial mandates, a permanent solution has remained elusive. The Eleventh and Twelfth Ministerial Conferences both failed to deliver an outcome. It is against this background that a coalition of more than 75 Members, including the G33, the ACP Group, and the African Group, tabled a joint proposal, JOB/AG/229 (WTO, 2022a), seeking several core improvements over the Bali Peace Clause. These proposals seek to enhance legal certainty, expand programme and product coverage, and revise the external reference price for measuring the market price support for foodstuffs actually procured at applied administered prices.

Opposition, led by the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and several Cairns Group members, centres on the concern that a permanent solution along the lines of the joint proposal would create open ended flexibility for developing members to subsidise procurement at administered prices in ways that could distort international markets. These members resist a standalone outcome and instead seek to embed the issue within a broader negotiating framework covering

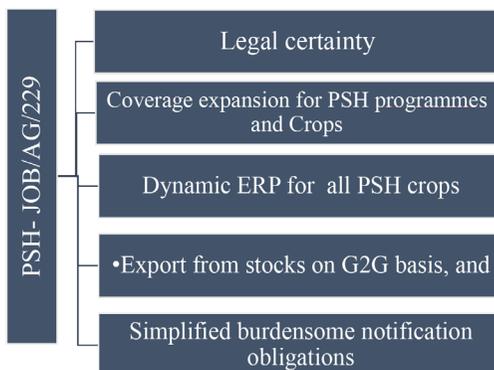
domestic support and market access, while also proposing conditions tied to export or import performance. Proponents of the joint proposal strongly reject any such linkage, insisting that the permanent solution is a standalone mandated issue that must not be made contingent on progress in other areas.

As the Fourteenth Ministerial Conference approaches, the negotiating landscape shows little sign of convergence. The African Group’s January 2026 submission anchors its position firmly in past mandates and the joint proposal. Jamaica’s proposal pivots toward trade and food security to advance agriculture negotiations on all pillars without directly addressing the outstanding mandate.

Brazil’s comprehensive approach effectively places the permanent solution at par with every other pillar of the agricultural negotiations, while the LDC Group, led by Gambia, advocates for a permanent solution specifically for least developed countries within the broader reform process envisaged under Article 20 of the AoA.

Figure 7: Proponents demand for a permanent solution to PSH

For PS on PSH, India, along with around more than 75 Developing countries, from G33, ACP, and the African Group, have submitted a joint Proposal JOB/AG/229 that seeks an improvement over the existing perpetual “**PEACE CLAUSE**” for food security.



Source: Based on WTO Proposal "Public stock holding for Food Security Purpose" (Job/Ag/229), 2022

In this sense, the PSH debate reveals a deeper contradiction within the multilateral trading system. Food security is widely recognised as a legitimate and urgent concern, yet the principal instrument relied upon by many developing countries to pursue it remains trapped in a provisional legal arrangement. The longer this persists, the more the temporary assumes the character of the permanent. For developing Members, this is not merely a procedural delay; it is the continued deferral of legal certainty on an issue that directly affects hunger, livelihoods, and the capacity of states to respond to food insecurity. A durable outcome on PSH therefore remains essential not only for the credibility of the agriculture negotiations, but for the legitimacy of a rules-based system that claims to accommodate development and food security concerns (Figure 7).

5.3. Cotton

In 2002, the Oxfam report “*Cultivating Poverty*” highlighted the adverse impact of substantial cotton subsidies, particularly in the United States, on African producers especially Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali (referred as the ‘C4’ countries) (Sharma *et al*, 2020). The publication of this report attracted the global attention and the issue of cotton became development priority in the agriculture negotiations at the WTO. The C4 countries have pursued a sustained negotiating effort to secure meaningful reductions in cotton-specific trade-distorting support. Their position reflects the broader objective of ensuring that multilateral trade rules do not undermine the development prospects and export competitiveness of LDCs (Table 3).

They have consistently called for substantial reductions in trade-distorting domestic support for cotton, especially under the Amber and Blue Boxes, and have advocated limiting such support to de minimis levels. They underscore that cotton subsidies in major producing Members depress world prices and adversely affect the incomes and livelihoods of smallholder cotton farmers in Africa, where cotton exports are a critical source of rural employment and poverty alleviation (WTO, 2003).

At the Hong Kong Ministerial Conference (2005), Members agreed to address cotton “ambitiously, expeditiously and specifically,”

and to treat it distinctly within the agriculture negotiations in relation to all trade-distorting policies affecting the sector in all three pillars of market access, domestic support and export competition (WTO, 2005b). Subsequent Ministerial decisions in Bali and Nairobi reaffirmed the mandate (WTO, 2013, 2015b). Moreover, in Nairobi Ministerial Conference, 2015 Members agreed that developed countries and developing countries declaring themselves in a position to do so, would provide duty-free and quota-free (DFQF) market access for cotton exports from LDCs from 1 January 2016; eliminate export subsidies for cotton; and strengthen development assistance for cotton-producing LDCs (WTO, 2015b).

Despite clear mandates, progress on the trade-distorting domestic support dimension has remained limited. Developed Members, notably the United States, have resisted treating cotton as a stand-alone issue separate from broader domestic support reforms in agriculture, arguing instead for a comprehensive approach. This position has contributed to a prolonged deadlock. While the European Union has expressed support for reducing domestic support beyond de minimis levels in line with the C4's concerns, it has been less receptive to demands relating to expanded market access. Divergences also persist among Members regarding whether outcomes on cotton domestic support should be linked to broader long term reform process under Article 20 of AoA.

Ahead of MC14, the C4+ countries i.e. Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire submitted a proposal on 4 December 2025 reiterating their long-standing demands and calling for a concrete outcome on cotton in line with past Ministerial mandates (WTO, 2025a). However, given entrenched positions particularly the reluctance of the USA to undertake cotton-specific reductions, the prospects for a substantive outcome at MC14 appear uncertain.

For the C4+ and other cotton-exporting LDCs, the issue is not merely commercial but developmental. Depressed global cotton prices directly affect rural incomes, employment, and poverty reduction efforts. From their perspective, fulfilling the cotton mandate would demonstrate the credibility of the development dimension and the responsiveness of

Table 3: Global Scenario of the Cotton Trade in 2025

Region	Production	Domestic consumption	Exports	Imports	Share of export in production	Share of import in production
	1000 MT (%)					
United States	3,030	348	2,613	1	86.24	0.03
Brazil	4,082	740	3,157	1	77.34	0.02
India	5,116	5,443	305	697	5.96	13.62
China	7,620	8,491	16	1,219	0.21	16.00
Pakistan	1,089	2,351	11	1,241	1.01	113.96
C4+ countries						
Benin	250	5	250	0	100.00	0.00
Burkina Faso	138	3	131	0	94.93	0.00
Mali	179	5	196	0	109.50*	0.00
Chad	30	2	33	0	110.00*	0.00
Cote d'Ivoire	122	2	120	0	98.36	0.00

Source: Authors' compilation based on the estimates by the US\$A-PSD for the year 2025 (<https://apps.fas.usda.gov/psdonline/app/index.html#/app/advQuery>)

Note: *It is higher than 100% as the last year stocks also exported.

the multilateral trading system to the concerns of its most vulnerable Members.

5.4. Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM)

The Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM) remains a long-pending mandated issue in the agriculture negotiations at the WTO and has been a central dimension of the WTO's development agenda. For several years, many developing members have sought the SSM as a special policy instrument that would give them the right to raise agricultural tariffs on products beyond the set bound levels in cases of import surges and price declines.

The rationale for this demand lies deeply embedded in the structural vulnerabilities of the agricultural sector in developing countries. In these countries production is predominantly undertaken by smallholder, low-income, or resource-poor farmers who, often cultivate less than two hectares of land. More importantly, across the global south, agriculture is not merely a commercial activity, but the predominant driver of food security, livelihood sustainability, and rural development. Additionally, developing members are particularly vulnerable to sudden import surges and steep price declines, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Exposure to volatile global markets, and high subsidies provided by developed Members, poses serious adjustment challenges, including displacement of local production and depressed farm-gate prices. Given limited financial resilience, smallholder farmers are often the first to bear the brunt of the impact. These micro-level shocks often have much broader macroeconomic implications, severely affecting rural incomes, employment, and long-term development outcomes. In this context, several members of the G-33 coalition and the African group have been justifying their demand, highlighting the urgent need for a trade-policy instrument that gives these members the policy space to cope with market shocks caused by import surges and price declines. (Das, et al., 2020).

It may be noted that, under the WTO rulebook, all members have access to multiple trade-remedy instruments, namely the anti-dumping, countervailing, and ordinary safeguard measures, across all agricultural

and non-agricultural products, to cope with various situations of increasing imports. However, in order to invoke any of these instruments, members are required to provide a detailed demonstration of ‘injury’ to their ‘domestic industry’ supported by comprehensive and timely data. In developing economies, where the agriculture sector remains informal and non-organized, with millions of small and dispersed producers, collecting such data in a timely and administratively feasible manner is often impractical. As a result, developing members can rarely operationalize these instruments in responding to sudden agricultural shocks.

Interestingly, under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), 39 WTO Members already have a right to invoke a similar policy-instrument, under the Special Safeguards (SSG) provision (Art.5). (Sharma. et al., 2024d). This permits these members to raise tariffs beyond the set bound levels in response to import surges or price depressions without proving any ‘injury’. However, only a handful of developing members are entitled to the use of SSGs, while most developed members have recourse to the instrument. This is because, during the Uruguay round, only members who had adopted the specific process of tariffication to bind their agricultural tariffs had been given access to the policy instrument (Das, et al., 2020). Consequently, in practice, while most developed members have an additional shield in the form of the SSG entitlements to protect their domestic producers against increasing imports, developing members can only respond to import pressures only by raising applied tariffs up to their bound levels. For products where the tariff overhang (i.e. the difference between the bound and applied tariff rates) is low or minimal, developing members are often left with no recourse but to leave their domestic producers exposed to significant inflows of subsidized imports. Thus, when the developing members seek access to the SSM as an SSG-like policy instrument, their ask is also deeply rooted in their overarching demand to remove the existing asymmetries in the AoA and level the playing field (Table 4).

Taking into account the aforementioned issues, the SSM was recognised as an integral part of the development dimension of the Doha

Table 4: Members Entitled to SSGs

Australia (10)	Indonesia (13)	Poland (144)
Barbados (37)	Israel (41)	Romania (175)
Botswana (161)	Japan (121)	Slovak Republic (114)
Bulgaria (21)	Korea (111)	South Africa (166)
Canada (150)	Malaysia (72)	Swaziland (166)
Colombia (56)	Mexico (293)	Switzerland-Liechtenstein (961)
Costa Rica (87)	Morocco (374)	Chinese Taipei (84)
Czech Republic (236)	Namibia (166)	Thailand (52)
Ecuador (7)	New Zealand (4)	Tunisia (32)
El Salvador (84)	Nicaragua (21)	United States (189)
EU (539)	Norway (581)	Uruguay (2)
Guatemala (107)	Panama (6)	Venezuela (76)
Hungary (117)	Philippines (118)	
Iceland (462)		

Source: WTO Secretariat background paper “Special Agricultural Safeguard” (G/AG/NG/S/9/Rev.1), 2002

Round. The 2005 Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration acknowledged the need to establish an SSM for developing Members, and the Nairobi Ministerial Decision (2015) reaffirmed this mandate, directing negotiations in dedicated sessions of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoA-SS) (Sharma. et al., 2024c). Over the years, Members have engaged in extensive discussions on technical modalities, including product coverage, trigger thresholds, and remedies. Several proposals and draft texts have been tabled; however, consensus on the specific modalities of the instrument has not been achieved.

In the ongoing negotiations, demandeurs of the SSM continue to seek an SSM that is simple, with accessible triggers, operable conditions, and effective remedies (WTO, 2023d). In their view, the SSM is a calibrated and temporary mechanism intended to address exceptional circumstances of import surges or price declines, thereby safeguarding

food and livelihood security. It is not conceived as a protectionist tool, but as a development-oriented flexibility consistent with Special and Differential Treatment (WTO, 2020). Thus, they often oppose linking SSM negotiations to other agricultural issues, including discussions on tariff reduction modalities.

5.5. Market Access

While several long-standing mandated issues in the agriculture negotiations remain unresolved, some Members including the United States, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay have placed greater emphasis on Market Access (MA) reforms. They argue these reforms are necessary to maintain overall balance in the agriculture negotiations since it directly shapes the level and form of protection through tariffs, tariff rate quotas (TRQs), and complex tariff structures, with clear implications for food security and export opportunities. Accordingly, they submitted proposal (WTO, 2023h) later revised on 5 December 2025 (WTO, 2025b), seeking reforms along the following lines:

1. **Tariff Simplification:** Conversion of non-ad valorem tariffs into ad valorem tariffs to improve transparency and comparability.
2. **Tariff Escalation:** Addressing situations where processed products are taxed at higher rates than the raw materials from which they are derived.
3. **High Tariffs and Tariff Peaks:** Imposing an absolute cap of 100 per cent on tariffs.
4. **Cotton:** Granting duty-free and quota-free (DFQF) access for cotton and related products originating from least-developed countries (LDCs).
5. **Tariff Reduction Formula:** Agreement on a clear formula to guide future tariff reductions, with modalities to be finalized by MC15.
6. **Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM):** Preserving the right of developing countries to invoke SSM in response to import surges or price depressions.

Box 1: Non-Advalorem Tariffs

Non-ad valorem tariffs are customs duties not based on a percentage of the product's value, but rather on physical units like weight, volume, or quantity. Common in agriculture, these include "specific", "compound", "mixed" or some other form. These other forms can be determined by complex technical factors; for example, the duty can be based on the percentage content of the agricultural component (sugar, milk, alcohol content, etc.) or its strength (e.g. the degree of sweetness).

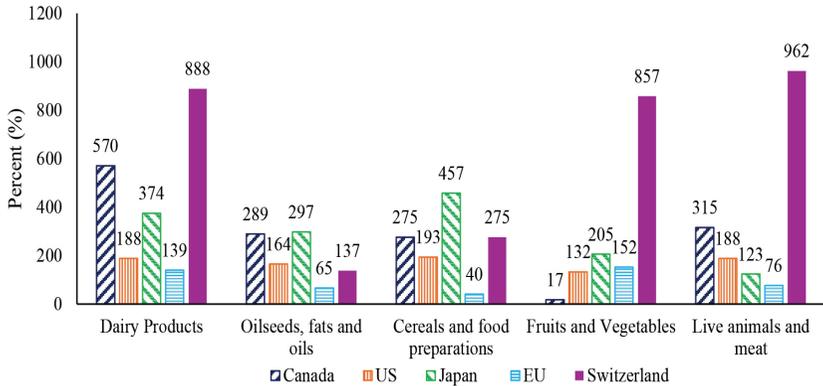
Example:

- i) Specific tariff is a fixed monetary value per unit of the dutiable item. For example, 303.4 EUR/100 kgs.
- ii) Compound tariff is a combination of ad valorem and specific tariffs. For example, 12.8 % + 176.8 EUR/100 kg.
- iii) Mixed tariffs involve a choice between ad valorem and/or specific tariffs depending on the condition attached. For example, 12.8 % max/min 176.8 EUR/100 kg.
- iv) Technical tariff is a rate dependent on the input content such as sugar or alcohol. For example, 8.3% + agricultural component MAX 18.7% + reduced additional duty on sugar.

Source: Based on WTO webpage

Proponents argue that these reforms would strengthen the four pillars of food security - availability, economic access, utilization, and stability. Yet this claim sits uneasily with prevailing realities. Several developed Members that consistently advocate tariff reduction and caution against protectionism continue to maintain exceptionally high levels of agricultural protection at home. For instance, Japan imposes tariffs of up to 457 per cent on rice, effectively preventing import competition. The European Union maintains tariffs exceeding 135 per cent on various dairy products and fruits (Figure 8). Canada protects its dairy sector with tariffs reaching 570 per cent. The United States applies tariffs of over 188 per cent on certain cereals and dairy products, with

Figure 8: Applied MFN Duties by Selected Members (2023)



Source: Sharma S.K. et al., Navigating Cross-Cutting Issues and Emerging Challenges in Agricultural Trade: Perspectives from the Global South (2025) RIS Discussion Paper No. 310.

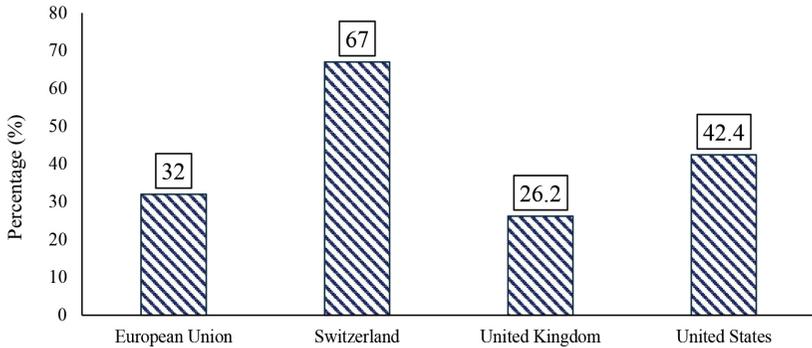
peanuts facing tariffs of around 164 per cent. Most strikingly, Switzerland homeland of the WTO enforces tariffs as high as 962 per cent on meats, 888 per cent on dairy, 857 per cent on fruits, and 275 per cent on cereals (Sharma et al., 2025).

These figures stand in sharp contrast to the liberalization rhetoric often directed at developing countries. The barriers to market access stem not only from the height of tariffs but also from the structural complexity of tariff regimes. Many advanced economies rely extensively on non-ad valorem duties specific, compound, mixed, or technically determined tariffs which can be opaque and difficult to navigate.

For producers in developing countries, the lack of transparency and predictability inherent in such structures can be as restrictive as high tariff rates themselves. The scale of this complexity is notable (Figure 9): non-ad valorem tariffs account for approximately 42 per cent of agricultural tariff lines in the United States, 32 per cent in the European Union, 67 per cent in Switzerland, and 26 per cent in the United Kingdom (Box 1) (Sharma et al., 2025).

Although these issues significantly affect developing-country

Figure 9: Non-Advalorem for Agriculture Products in Selected Countries (2023)



Source: Sharma S.K. et al, Navigating Cross-Cutting Issues and Emerging Challenges in Agricultural Trade: Perspectives from the Global South (2025) RIS Discussion Paper No. 310.

exporters, negotiations under the market access pillar have yet to reach meaningful convergence. Many developing Members therefore contend that market access discussions are not sufficiently mature to warrant prioritization at this stage. Instead, they argue that MC14 outcomes should first address long-standing mandated issues and areas where consensus is more attainable, warning that premature advancement of ambitious market access reforms could further entrench existing negotiating imbalances.

5.6. Export Restrictions

During periods of food crisis global markets often experience supply shortages and sharp price spikes, prompting governments adopt a range of policy responses to stabilize domestic markets and protect vulnerable populations. These measures may include reductions in import tariffs to augment supply, as well as export restrictions to prevent excessive outflows of essential foodstuffs. A number of Members, irrespective of their level of development have resorted to export restrictions during crises, including India, the European Union, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt,

Table 5: Export Prohibition Imposed by WTO Members on Agricultural Products* since 2021

Member	Products
European Union	Cereals (wheat, rye, barley, oat, corn, soy beans and sunflower seeds)
Georgia	Wheat, Barley
India	Wheat
	Sugar
	Onion
	Non-basmati white rice (Semi-milled or wholly milled rice, whether or not polished or glazed: other)
	Broken Rice
Kazakhstan	Hay, silage, seed and other oats, seed and other rye
	Potatoes and carrots
	Sunflower seeds; sunflower oil
	Potatoes
	Wheat and meslin, Wheat or meslin flour
Thailand	Sugar, raw and refined
Ukraine	Buckwheat; buckwheat grain (uncoated)
	Sugar

Source: Authors compilation based on Export Restriction Notifications, AGIMS, WTO

Note: * Live Animal and Animal based products are not included.

Ghana, Argentina, Ukraine, Russia, Türkiye, and Viet Nam. (Sharma et al., 2024b).

Export restrictions may take various forms (Table 5), including export bans, quotas, duties, licensing requirements, or other regulatory controls. While such measures are often criticised for potentially inflating international prices, disrupting global supply chains, and affecting the food security of importing countries, exporting Members consider them an important instrument to ensure domestic availability and price stability in times of crisis.

The WTO framework governing these measures is set out in Article

XI of the GATT 1994 and Article 12 of the Agreement on Agriculture. These provisions permit Members to apply temporary, targeted and transparent export prohibitions or restrictions to prevent or relieve critical shortages of foodstuffs or other essential products. Members imposing such measures are required to notify the Committee on Agriculture and give due consideration to the food security concerns of importing Members. The rules therefore seek to balance the policy space of exporting Members with the interests of food-importing countries.

So far, at the WTO progress on this pillar has been limited. At the MC12, WTO Members agreed to exempt food purchases by the World Food Programme (WFP) for humanitarian purposes from export restrictions. Importantly, this exemption is accompanied by a safeguard clause clarifying that it does not prevent a Member from adopting measures necessary to ensure its domestic food security in accordance with relevant WTO provisions. (WTO, 2022b). Notwithstanding this outcome, post MC12 certain Members have tabled proposals seeking additional disciplines on export restrictions.

As MC14 approaches, the issue of export restrictions (ERs) has start gaining traction prominently in the Special Sessions of the Committee on Agriculture, with some of the G10 Members and the United Kingdom seeking an outcome on this issue as part of comprehensive approach. Some Members including United Kingdom and Japan have argued that existing disciplines are insufficient to address the disruptive impact of export restrictions on global supply chains and international prices (WTO, 2021). Their proposals include clarifying terms such as “critical shortages,” introducing more stringent advance notification requirements (including a proposed 30-day prior notification), modifying notification formats. They contend that enhanced transparency and predictability are necessary to protect food-importing Members from sudden disruptions. Moreover, LDCs also proposed exemptions for them and Net Food-Importing Developing Countries (NFIDCs) form ER imposed by Net food-exporting Members. (WTO, 2023e)

While, developing Members maintain that export restrictions are legitimate and essential policy tools to maintain domestic food security

and price stability. They argue that the current WTO provisions already reflect a carefully negotiated balance between exporters and importers. From this perspective, additional disciplines like stringent advance notification requirements and other could undermine the effectiveness of export restrictions, which are often adopted in response to sudden and unforeseen domestic shortages. (Sharma et al., 2024b).

Divergent views on this issue contributed to the absence of consensus at MC13 in 2024, and the situation for MC14 does not appear to be different. Reaching consensus on any outcome on this issue seems highly challenging. The ongoing debate therefore continues on how to maintain a balanced approach that ensures transparency and predictability in international markets while safeguarding Members' sovereign right to respond promptly to domestic food security challenges.

5.7. Export Competition and Transparency

The negotiating weight has not been evenly distributed across pillars. Pillars such as Market access and Export Restriction have seen little traction in recent years because the talks have not matured to the point where Members are prepared to engage on concrete modalities. Export competition has seen even less engagement since the Nairobi Ministerial Decision on Export Competition eliminated export subsidies there by leaving limited scope for further negotiation on this pillar.

Beyond the issues discussed above, transparency cuts across all pillars of the agriculture negotiations. While some Members favour stronger transparency and monitoring disciplines, including by streamlining existing notification requirements, others have cautioned against creating overly burdensome obligations. In particular, the African Group, India, Cuba, and Oman have stressed that any discipline on transparency must remain mindful of the institutional, technical, and resource constraints faced by developing countries LDCs, and should not impose disproportionate compliance burdens.

6. Way Forward

The way forward must begin with political realism. Even the WTO's own leadership has acknowledged that expectations for a major breakthrough at MC14 are low and that negotiations have seen limited movement since MC13. In that context, developing country Members cannot afford to disperse negotiating energy across every track and every rebranded package. The strategic task is to align positions, tighten coordination across coalitions, and insist that any outcomes, even if incremental, deliver first on long standing mandated issues. Priority should remain on a permanent solution for public stockholding for food security purposes, the Special Safeguard Mechanism, and cotton, rather than allowing negotiating bandwidth to be diverted toward non-mandated tracks that are not yet ripe for deliverables.

A familiar pattern has come to define the agriculture negotiations. Mandated issues are routinely acknowledged as important for food security, rural livelihoods, and development, then absorbed into broader conversations about balance across pillars, and ultimately deferred on the ground that progress elsewhere is insufficient. The result is not balanced; it is postponement by design. The experience of public stockholding is instructive. Members agreed at Bali on an interim peace clause to shield certain programmes from legal challenge, but that arrangement has endured precisely because the permanent solution was repeatedly deferred. The peace clause has effectively become the resting place of the issue rather than the bridge to a settlement. Developing Members should not allow MC14 to reproduce this template across other mandated areas, where interim understandings slowly harden into permanent standstills.

Coalition building is therefore the core strategic imperative. Developing Members should treat MC14 as a moment to lock in a development-first landing zone through structured cross-coalition alignment across the G33, the African Group, the ACP Group, and the LDC Group. The objective is to protect negotiating coherence and prevent fragmentation. When developing Members present their priorities in a unified voice, the burden shifts. The question stops being whether

they are asking for too much and becomes whether the institution can deliver what it has already promised. A disciplined coalition strategy also guards against divide-and-rule dynamics, where competing proposals are selectively endorsed and then used to dilute the core demand for mandated outcomes. In practical terms, coalition alignment should translate into a single shared narrative, a tight list of deliverables, and common red lines on linkage strategies that seek to convert priority mandates into conditional outcomes subject to progress elsewhere.

At the systemic level, this strategy must be paired with a firm defence of Special and Differential Treatment as part of the WTO's legal architecture rather than a negotiable concession. The WTO agreements explicitly contain Special and Differential Treatment provisions that grant developing countries specific rights and flexibilities. These exist because the multilateral trading system recognises unequal starting points and the need for positive efforts to ensure that developing countries, particularly the least developed among them, secure a share in the growth of international trade commensurate with their development needs, as reflected in the Marrakesh Agreement. Special and Differential Treatment is not charity. It is the product of hard-won negotiations and a foundational element of the rules-based framework that members have collectively agreed to uphold.

Yet the current push for institutional reform, advanced by several developed Members, increasingly seeks to narrow or reframe these flexibilities, even as those same Members continue to benefit from asymmetries embedded in the existing rulebook and from decades of accumulated policy space secured under earlier negotiating rounds. Any reform conversation that seeks to condition or curtail Special and Differential Treatment while leaving historical asymmetries untouched risks converting reform into reallocation, tightening disciplines where policy space is already scarce while preserving it where it remains abundant. That is not a neutral adjustment. Where reforms are discussed, sequence matters. Structural imbalances must be addressed first, not deferred until after developing Members have been asked to accept new constraints. Developing Members must remain ready to engage

constructively and contribute to a credible reform pathway, but they must ensure that development priorities remain central to any negotiation, not a residual consideration addressed after others have been satisfied.

This is not only about what developing countries need. It is about what the WTO must do to remain credible as a member-driven organisation where ministerial mandates carry meaning. Credibility is not rebuilt through reaffirmations. It is rebuilt through delivery. If MC14 again yields no outcomes on the mandated agenda, it will reinforce the most damaging perception of the institution: that the WTO can still police its rules but struggles to deliver for those whose food security and livelihoods were meant to lie at the heart of the reform mandate.

The way forward is therefore both practical and principled. Practical, because it recognises the limited political bandwidth for ambitious bargains at MC14 and concentrates effort on achievable, mandate-anchored deliverables. Principled, because it insists that the WTO's legitimacy rests on honouring its own decisions and the development rationale embedded in its founding framework. Developing Members should approach MC14 not as a stage for new declarations, but as a test of whether the institution can finally translate long-standing mandates into concrete outcomes.

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