B2O Trade & Investment | WTO Roundtable

Post Event Report | October 2025

Event Overview

Title: Making the WTO Work for Business and Consumers: A South-South Dialogue on WTO Reform

Date & Time: 17 September 2025 | 13:30-15:00

Location: South African Permanent Mission

Convenors: South African Permanent Mission to the WTO, B20 South Africa Trade & Investment Task Force and the T20 Secretariat

Executive Summary

This roundtable provided a platform for African stakeholders and the broader Global South to contribute to ongoing discussions on urgent WTO reforms. The dialogue took place against the backdrop of challenges to the rules-based trade order, including rising protectionism, unilateral tariffs, carbon border adjustment measures, and new digital trade restrictions. These developments have intensified uncertainty for both businesses and governments.

Specifically, the discussion aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- **Articulate Global South priorities**, particularly Africa and BRICS perspectives on WTO reform, emphasizing industrialisation, job creation, sustainable growth, and inclusive development.
- **Promote inclusive multilateralism**, ensuring that reforms reflect MSME participation, digital trade readiness, regional value chain integration, and consumer welfare, aligned with B20 recommendations.
- **Strengthen South–South cooperation** by fostering collaboration between African, BRICS, and multilateral stakeholders on pragmatic reform pathways, including trade facilitation and investment partnerships.
- **Advance Africa's integration story**, positioning AfCFTA as a model for regulatory coherence.
- **Propose practical solutions with global relevance**, delivering business-informed inputs on WTO reform, climate-responsive trade, and resilience that complement multilateral processes.

Summary of Discussions

WTO Reforms, Predictability & Inclusive Multilateralism

The WTO's continued relevance
Participants stressed that the WTO remains indispensable in maintaining stability and predictability in global trade. However, "business as usual" is no longer possible in the face of rising protectionism and new technological opportunities such as artificial intelligence (AI).

Historic calls for reform
The need for WTO reform has existed since its creation. During the Uruguay Round, for example, developing economies made significant concessions by agreeing to a new framework for intellectual property protection. Although many disagreed with the high cost of implementing these rules – which raised the price of patented goods – they complied in good faith, relying on promises that remain unfulfilled to this day.

Deadlocks and urgency
Several critical issues remain unresolved, including negotiations on agriculture and food security, dispute settlement, plurilateral agreements, and consensus-based decision-making. Participants agreed that reform of the WTO is now a matter of urgency.

Erosion of cooperation
Concerns were raised about the increasing perception of international cooperation as a zero-sum game. This stands in contrast to the collective vision behind the Sustainable Development Goals. Nationalist and insular tendencies, combined with fragmented carbon tax policies, are placing disproportionate burdens on African businesses – particularly those led by women and youth.

Inclusive development through WTO reform
Participants emphasised that reforms must:

- Minimise job losses linked to the weakening of global trade,
- Restore confidence and certainty for long-term investments, and
- Lower the cost of doing business across borders.

This is especially pressing for Africa and the wider Global South, which are facing declining Official Development Assistance (ODA) flows and rising debt servicing costs.

Africa's priorities
Trade and industrial policy must be aligned to rebalance trade in favour of African economies, moving the continent away from dependence on raw materials toward value-added production.

Digitalisation and AI
While the WTO recognises the importance of sustainable development, participants warned that the digital/AI revolution risks widening inequality:

- WTO data shows AI will disproportionately benefit services exporters (advanced economies), while Africa and other developing regions remain reliant on goods exports.
- The proliferation of bilateral "quid pro quo" trade deals risks worsening these inequalities further.

Ministerial Conference as a turning point
The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) was identified as a pivotal moment for reform, especially for SMEs. While the Marrakesh Agreement already articulates key principles, implementation has been the major barrier. Participants stressed that the G20, given its economic weight, has the capacity to drive meaningful change.

Supply Chain Resilience, Climate-Responsive Trade & Africa's Integration

Resilience through bargaining power
Supply chain resilience is stronger when countries and industries have leverage as both buyers and sellers. Africa and the Global South must therefore develop industrial capacity to strengthen their positions in global trade.

SMEs under pressure
SMEs and the informal sector play a central role in African economies and supply chains, but are highly exposed to external shocks. With successive crises – COVID-19, the Russia–Ukraine war, and ongoing tariff disputes – 87% of SME owners reported stress and frustration from operating in "crisis after crisis."

The challenge of NTBs
While tariffs dominate headlines, non-tariff barriers (NTBs) present equally serious challenges. NTBs reduce competitiveness, stifle innovation, and prevent regional market integration needed for industrial development. Women- and youth-led SMEs, in particular, lack the capacity to navigate these barriers, making their elimination an urgent priority. Faster decision-making and agreement adoption within the WTO framework were seen as critical.

Adopting plurilateral agreements
Plurilateral agreements and Joint Statement Initiatives (JSIs) offer opportunities to strengthen the system where consensus is otherwise elusive. Participants emphasised that where these initiatives impose no costs on non-participating members, they should be allowed to move forward so others can benefit.

Knowledge sharing and learning
Trade has lifted more people out of poverty than aid. China's experience demonstrates how trade can drive development, and Africa can learn both from this and from other regions such as ASEAN, particularly in building effective AI and digital regulatory frameworks.

Digitalisation challenges
While digital trade and AI can enhance resilience, adoption in Africa remains low. Many SMEs avoid digitalisation out of concern it will expose them to formalisation and taxation. Proper regulatory frameworks and incentives are needed to encourage uptake, while ensuring they reflect local contexts. ASEAN's approach was highlighted as a useful reference.

AfCFTA as the vehicle for integration
The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was described as the key instrument for deepening African trade integration. To succeed, it requires:

- Adequate trade financing mechanisms (including a dedicated fund for African businesses)
- Infrastructure investment, particularly in energy networks such as regional power pools (e.g., the Southern Africa Power Pool).

Climate-responsive trade
In terms of climate-responsive trade, participants echoed T20 recommendations that industrial and investment policies must be designed to enable just energy transitions while supporting economic growth.

Strategic Enablers for Action

Beyond the thematic priorities, participants identified three cross-cutting enablers that can accelerate reform and ensure Africa's meaningful participation in global trade:

- **Institutionalise structured business engagement in the WTO**
  Building on the Business Advisory Council established by DG Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, there is a need for regular, formalised mechanisms for business input into WTO decision-making, including ministerials.
- **Leverage G20 leadership for reform**
  The G20's influence is critical to advancing reforms globally, and particularly in Africa, where trade rules, industrialisation, and investment gaps intersect most acutely.
- **Develop digital trade corridors as a best practice**
  Establishing interconnected digital trade corridors will help reduce transaction costs, connect businesses across borders, and build more resilient supply chains.

Participants

We extend our sincere appreciation to all participants whose insights and contributions enriched the discussion. Your perspectives ensured that Africa and the wider Global South were meaningfully represented in the dialogue on WTO reform and global trade resilience.

Government & Multilaterals

- *Host:* Ambassador Mzukisi Qobo, South African Ambassador to the WTO
- Ambassador Tsiu Khathibe, Lesotho Ambassador to the WTO
- Ambassador Dr. Senthil Pandian C, Indian Ambassador to the WTO
- Dr. Bright Okogu, Office of the WTO DG
- Ms. Pamela Coke-Hamilton, ITC
- Dr. Annalisa Primi, OECD

Business Leaders

- Ms. Busi Mabuza, B20 T&I Chair
- Mr. João Pedro Taborda, Embraer
- Dr. Stavros Nicolaou, Aspen

Think Tanks & Academia

- Dr. Patrik Kovács, Business at OECD
- Ms. Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, T20 / SAIIA
- Dr. Maarten Smeets, World Trade Institute
- Dr. Axel Berger, IDOS
- Dr. Joseph Matola, SAIIA
- Ms. Luanda Mpungose, T20 / SAIIA
- Dr. Sandy Chong, ASEAN Business Alliance / AI Expert

Knowledge Partner (BCG)

- Ms. Trudi Makhaya, BCG
- Mr. Michael McAdoo, BCG
- Dr. Nikolaus Lang, BCG