



## TRADE POLICY BRIEFS

### THIRTEENTH WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE: WHAT OUTCOMES FOR AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES?

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#### KEY MESSAGES

- The 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) was held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, from 26 February to 2 March 2024.
- Agriculture and fisheries subsidies were at the centre of the discussions, but no concrete outcome was possible due to differences and divergence of positions among Members.
- “Abu Dhabi package” includes a Ministerial Declaration, reaffirming the principles and objectives of the WTO and providing the framework for the continuation of the work in a number of areas, as well as a few other decisions and declarations, including some with relevance to the agricultural sector.

The 13th Ministerial Conference of the WTO (MC13) took place from 26 February to 2 March 2024 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Conference was chaired by His Excellency Dr Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, Minister of State for Foreign Trade of the host country.

Agriculture and fisheries subsidies were once more at the centre of the deliberations. Discussions were based on draft texts (WTO, 2024a, 2024b) submitted in the run-up to the Conference by the Chairpersons of the respective WTO negotiating groups, reflecting the state of the negotiations and any progress made prior to MC13. However, despite the extension of the Conference by two additional days in an effort to reach consensus, differences among the WTO Members prevailed and no concrete outcome was achieved on these issues.

#### Agriculture negotiations

On agriculture, the issues discussed included domestic support, public stockholding for food security purposes, market access, the Special Safeguard Mechanism for developing countries, export restrictions, and cotton. WTO Members continued to have divergent positions both on the specifics of each issue and on the balance between them. In particular, on public stockholding for food security purposes, they could not reach an agreement on whether a permanent solution should be decided at MC13 or whether it should be part of a broader post-MC13 work programme. The level of ambition across topics as well as the content and scope of a possible outcome for the most vulnerable food-importing member countries, notably a possible exemption from export restrictions, were also on the agenda of the discussions.

#### Fisheries negotiations

The *Ministerial Decision on the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies*, adopted at the 12th Ministerial Conference in June 2022, instructed the WTO Members to continue negotiations

based on the outstanding issues covering additional disciplines on subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, including the special and differential treatment for developing and least developed country members. The discussions at MC13 focused on the prohibition of subsidies to distant water fishing activities, the geographical limitation for the exemption of small-scale fisheries and transitional periods under the special and differential treatment provisions for developing country members. Nevertheless, WTO Members could not bridge the divergence in their positions on these issues.

#### The Abu Dhabi Package

Despite modest results in agriculture and fisheries, WTO Members adopted a number of important decisions and declarations that are relevant for the two sectors. These included: a *Ministerial Decision on Dispute Settlement Reform*, which reiterates the intention to have a fully and well-functioning dispute settlement system accessible to all Members by 2024 (WTO, 2024c); a *Ministerial Decision on Work Programme on Small Economies*, instructing the WTO Secretariat, in collaboration with relevant International Organizations, to work on - inter alia - “Addressing the importance of resilient, accessible, open, reliable and transparent supply chains for small economies given food security issues, and the impact of non-tariff measures on trade costs” (WTO, 2024d); a *Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening Regulatory Cooperation to Reduce Technical Barriers to Trade*, aimed at supporting the WTO Committee on technical barriers to trade (TBT) in advancing work on a number of relevant issues in the context of the “Tenth Triennial Review” of the TBT Agreement (WTO, 2024e); and a *Ministerial Declaration on the Precise, Effective and Operational Implementation of Special and Differential Treatment Provisions of the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade* (WTO, 2024f).

Finally, in the *Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration* (WTO, 2024g), Members reaffirmed the principles and objectives of the WTO, underscored the importance they attach to open, inclusive, resilient, sustainable, diversified, and reliable global supply chains, and their role in ensuring that production and trade can more easily recover from crises and disruptions. Moreover, they recognized the short-term challenges particularly faced by developing country members in confronting global and domestic crises (including disasters caused by natural hazards) and encouraged discussions in the WTO to support resilience and disaster preparedness, highlighting that the inclusion of other relevant international organizations in the discussions can promote coherence. Members also recognised that women's economic empowerment and participation in trade contribute to economic growth and sustainable development, and that micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) play an important role in economic growth, sustainable development, and poverty reduction.

## Accessions to the WTO

The Ministerial Conference decided that the Comoros and Timor-Leste may accede to the WTO under the terms and conditions set out in their respective protocols of accession. The two countries will formally join the WTO on the thirtieth day following the date on which the protocols have been accepted by their respective domestic constituencies. The accession of these two new members will bring the total number of WTO members to 166.

In her closing remarks, the WTO Director-General Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala paid tribute to the efforts of Members and stressed that MC13 had made important progress on several issues. On agriculture, she noted that - for the first time in many years - a text had been agreed as a basis for the Ministerial Conference, which would be useful for the continuation of the discussions in Geneva. On fisheries subsidies, she stressed that MC13 prepared the ground for the conclusion of the negotiations.

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