

Reimagining Global Trade Governance: Youth Priorities for WTO Reform

A report by the
WTO Young Trade Leaders

June 2026





Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by the 2025 WTO Young Trade Leaders under their own responsibility. The views expressed in the report and the conclusions belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or opinions of the WTO Secretariat or WTO Members.

About the report

This report is the third in a series of reports initiated by the Young Trade Leaders and prepared under their own responsibility. The series began with a [Global Youth Consultations Report on Trade](#) issued in July 2025 and was followed by a [LAC Youth Consultation on Global Trade and Climate Justice](#) in February 2026. Additional reports are anticipated in the future as part of the ongoing commitment of the Young Trade Leaders to provide input and youth perspectives on global trade.

About the Young Trade Leaders programme

The Young Trade Leaders programme aims to foster a better understanding of the WTO's work and international trade among young people.

WTO Young Trade Leaders are exceptional young people who have a clear understanding of how trade can be of benefit to people and the planet. They bring new perspectives and ideas about the role of trade and the WTO while also having the opportunity to learn about the organization's work and play a role in advancing its mission.

For more information, please visit: www.wto.org/ytl.

This report by the WTO Young Trade Leaders draws on more than 100 submissions from young people around the world to set out a generational perspective on the future of the WTO. It analyzes five thematic areas where reform is urgent, aiming for a multilateral trading order that is more enforceable, inclusive, and responsive to the structural challenges of the present and future.



Trade governance: Transforming Special and Differential Treatment into a legally enforceable mechanism across all WTO agreements, with needs-based flexibility and transition periods tied to actual country needs, could better support development. Competition rules should also be reformed to support youth-owned SMEs through “soft-landing ecosystems” that shield smaller firms from excessive barriers. To sustain institutional legitimacy and enhance youth engagement, the WTO could institutionalize youth observer days and regular consultations, and curtail exclusive informal formats such as green rooms to ensure open participation by all economies in negotiations.



Industrial transformation: The shift from efficiency-driven to security-oriented supply chains is unfolding without rules to prevent fragmentation. Transparent rules on critical minerals would promote local processing, alongside clearer TRIPS flexibility guidelines to keep critical health and green technologies accessible. Young people broadly support modernizing the Information Technology Agreement to cover 21st century technologies. While recognizing its legitimacy as a sovereignty tool, the WTO should also establish guardrails around the security exception to encourage greater transparency and public justification in its use.



Climate and the environment: Trade and climate policy needs to be better integrated, including continued work on closer alignment between WTO and UNFCCC processes. This could include creating an “Aid for Trade” equivalent specifically for climate transition compliance, covering emissions measurement, MSME technical support, and recognition of developing economies’ national climate commitments in compliance assessments. A renewed Environmental Goods Agreement should democratize access to green technologies, while indigenous and community knowledge should be embedded in trade-climate governance rather than treated as peripheral.



Digital trade: The recently lapsed e-commerce moratorium on customs duties for electronic transmissions is regarded by many as a matter of survival for many young entrepreneurs: without it, a young developer in Douala cannot realistically compete with one in Geneva. It is necessary to renew the e-commerce moratorium and simplify mobile payment rules. A multilateral digital trade framework should establish minimum procedural standards for data flow commitments, including independent regulatory assessment, so smaller economies are not forced into bilateral negotiations on unequal terms.



Institutional reform: The Appellate Body’s continued paralysis undermines the WTO’s credibility and weakens protections for all economies. A fully functioning dispute settlement system should be restored, noting that member interest in the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement reflects the broader demand for such a revived mechanism. More fundamentally, the WTO should adopt a more flexible approach to multilateral consensus without sacrificing binding, enforceable outcomes.

Lead authors



Atyia Al-Hammud
WTO Young Trade Leader
(Ukraine)



Alexandra Kaiss
WTO Young Trade Leader
(United States)

Contributors



Serena Indij Da Costa
WTO Young Trade Leader
(Brazil)



Paola Flores
WTO Young Trade Leader
(Bolivia)



Karo Harutyunyan
WTO Young Trade Leader
(Armenia)



Olexa Heshima
WTO Young Trade Leader
(Rwanda)



Aarushi Shrivastav
WTO Young Trade Leader
(India)

Introduction

Background and Purpose

The WTO was built on a premise: that rules-based, non-discriminatory trade would generate broadly shared prosperity and narrow the gaps between economies. For decades, that premise commanded broad political support. Trade volumes grew, supply chains spread across continents, and millions were lifted out of poverty. The system had its critics, but it had a defensible record. That consensus has since frayed, and young people have been clear about where change is needed. For many developing economies, integration into global supply chains has not consistently delivered promised development gains, with countries too often locked into low-value activities while processing and manufacturing value accumulates elsewhere. For many advanced economies, concerns have taken a different form: non-market practices and large-scale state subsidies have undermined confidence in the level playing field the system was designed to provide, while the gains from trade have not always been distributed evenly, leaving workers, regions, and industries facing significant adjustment costs.

Geopolitical competition has compounded both sets of problems, turning trade relationships into instruments of strategic leverage and prompting a wave of industrial policy that has called into question what the rules actually require, and of whom. Throughout all of this, the Appellate Body has been paralyzed since 2019, leaving the system without credible dispute settlement at precisely the moment it is most needed.


Against this backdrop, the generation that will live longest with today's trade architecture has had relatively little say in shaping it. Young people have a direct stake in trade's effects – as entrepreneurs navigating fragmented payment systems, as workers in industries exposed to import competition, as citizens of economies whose development options are shaped by what the rules permit, and as the generation that will inherit the consequences of a system that fails to keep pace with the world it governs.

This report, produced as part of a youth consultation in parallel to reform discussions at the WTO, draws on written submissions from young leaders across six regions to surface their priorities, frustrations, and specific proposals for reform. It does not attempt to speak for all young people, but it offers something that broader surveys of public opinion rarely provide: detailed, firsthand accounts of how the trading system looks to those who will inherit it. The report is organized around five thematic areas that emerged consistently across submissions: trade governance and equity, industrial transformation, the relationship between trade and climate, digital trade, and institutional reform. Each section draws on contributor voices directly, identifies areas of convergence and disagreement, and closes with concrete recommendations.

Methodology

The report is based on 101 written submissions gathered through an open call for submissions, which was posted on LinkedIn and distributed to universities, trade organizations, non-governmental organizations, and young professional associations. Contributors responded to a form that included free space for contributors to share their views on multilateral trade reform, with consent given to have their views reflected in this report.

Geographically, the largest share of submissions came from Africa (38), followed by Asia-Pacific (26), Europe (19), North America (9), Latin America and the Caribbean (8), and the Middle East (1). In terms of background, the majority of contributors were students (77), with smaller numbers from the public sector (11), private sector (10), and NGOs (3). Contributors ranged in age from 18 to 28, with the largest cohorts aged 24 (17 contributors), 28 (14), and 23 (13).



Two limitations are worth noting. First, participation was self-selecting: contributors were already sufficiently interested in trade policy and governance to engage with the consultation and therefore are not representative of the broader youth population. Second, while submissions were received from all regions and of a variety of backgrounds, participation was uneven, with Africa and students comprising a large share of respondents and comparatively fewer contributions from the private sector and some regions.

Thematic Analysis: The Youth Perspective

A. Beyond Equal Rules: Rebuilding Equity in Trade Governance

The foundational legitimacy of the WTO is increasingly tied to its ability to recognize that “equal rules do not automatically create equal opportunities” (Iniyaa, Asia-Pacific). Meaningful reform demands a more inclusive model of trade governance – one grounded in “shared stewardship rather than periodic consultation” – that supports the economic aspirations of developing nations and youth (Michidmaa, Africa).

1. Reconceptualizing Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT)

Across submissions, S&DT is often viewed less as a tool for development than as a concession to WTO agreements, one that has not consistently supported the capacity-building needs of developing economies.

From “Charity” to Correction: Respondents called for S&DT to be reframed from “charity to structural correction” (Hamid, Asia-Pacific). Rather than treating S&DT flexibilities as discretionary concessions, contributors argued that S&DT should provide developing economies with the policy space needed for industrialization, digitalization, and climate adaptation.

Enforceable Flexibility: There was also a strong call for S&DT to become a “legally enforceable and fully operational” mechanism across WTO agreements (Rachel, Africa). Contributors emphasized the importance of “needs-based flexibility and realistic transition periods” to support the sustainable integration of developing economies into the global trading system (Iniyaa, Asia-Pacific).

2. The “Small Actor” Perspective: MSMEs and Youth Entrepreneurs

The effectiveness of trade rules is often experienced through whether small businesses and young entrepreneurs can realistically participate in and benefit from international markets.

Fostering “Soft-Landing” Ecosystems: Contributors called for stronger “soft-landing ecosystems” for youth-owned MSMEs, encompassing trade information access and practical market-entry support (Carson, North America). Respondents also stressed that the WTO should help ensure these entrepreneurs can connect to foreign markets by reducing the non-tariff barriers that often impede cross-border trade (Rebecca, Africa).

Structural Barriers for Producers: The exclusion of small producers from the benefits of international trade is a recurring theme. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, small coffee producers are often excluded from international markets and forced to sell at low prices due to a lack of digital traceability and direct market access (Kakule, Africa). Similarly, young entrepreneurs often capture only a small share of the return locally despite their products generating high retail value abroad (Nyasha, Africa).

3. Participatory Governance and Institutional Legitimacy

Young contributors repeatedly stress that people affected by trade rules should have a meaningful role in shaping them.

Partners, Not Tokens: Young people demand to be “involved in the decision-making process and not just be tokens” (Siyabonga, Africa). This could include institutionalizing youth observer days and regular consultations to ensure the WTO reflects contemporary global realities (Yanis, Asia-Pacific).

Dismantling Exclusive Formats: To be more inclusive, the WTO could reform its negotiating culture. This involves “limiting the use of exclusive informal formats such as green rooms to ensure open-ended participation” for developing economies (Kengni, Africa) (Refilwe, Africa).



Recommendations

- Make S&DT a legally enforceable mechanism across all WTO agreements with needs-based flexibility and realistic transition periods that reflect the actual conditions of developing economies.
- Strengthen soft-landing ecosystems for youth-owned MSMEs through trade information access and practical market-entry support, while reducing the non-tariff barriers that prevent small producers from capturing fair value in international markets.
- Institutionalize youth observer days and regular consultations to ensure the WTO reflects contemporary global realities.
- Limit the use of exclusive informal formats such as green rooms to ensure open-ended participation for developing economies.

B. Managing Industrial Transformation Without Fragmenting the Global Economy

As global supply chains shift from efficiency-driven to resilience- and security-oriented models, contributors stressed the need to manage industrial transformation without sliding into a “full protectionist equilibrium” (AJ, North America). Young leaders warned that rising geopolitical rivalry and strategic industrial policy risk fragmenting the trading system, turning economic interdependence from a source of stability into a strategic vulnerability (Yuhui, Europe) (Evan, North America).

1. Resilience vs. “Weaponized Interdependence”

The shift from open integration to economic fragmentation requires a fundamental reassessment of how the global trade networks operate.

The Risk of Structural Leverage: The era of hyper-globalization has been replaced by what scholars call “weaponized interdependence,” where supply chains are used as leverage and geopolitical tools (AJ, North America). Today’s protectionist ecosystem uses tariffs, export controls, and security exceptions as default tools. As one contributor notes, “from rare earths to semiconductors, we see our economic ties and mutual reliance severed” (Evan, North America).

Strategic Guardrails: Contributors called for moving from lowest-cost sourcing toward “clearly defined, shared commitments” through multilateral or plurilateral agreements. While the WTO must accommodate sovereignty through the security exception, Members should surround that space with “hard guardrails” and public justifications to prevent strategic abuse (AJ, North America).

2. Critical Minerals: The New Currency and the “Resource Curse”

Critical minerals, now described as the “new currency of the 21st century,” sit at the center of both the green and digital transitions (Divya, Asia-Pacific).


The Risk of Fragmentation: As major powers pursue friend-shoring and dominate mineral processing, resource-rich nations risk becoming “battlegrounds rather than beneficiaries” (Divya, Asia-Pacific). Without updated rules, producing countries may face a new resource curse by supplying critical raw materials while capturing only a fraction of the value generated, and bearing a disproportionate share of the environmental and social costs.

Policy Priorities: Reform must deliver “transparent, fair rules on critical minerals” that limit harmful export restrictions while promoting local processing and responsible investment to ensure producing economies capture more of the value chain (Divya, Asia-Pacific).

3. Industrial Policy Space and Technology Transfer

For developing economies, industrial transformation requires both the policy space to nurture emerging sectors and meaningful access to the technologies that make it possible.

Moving Beyond Raw Materials: Contributors argue that current rules often “lock [developing economies] into low-value segments of global value chains,” limiting their ability to industrialize and diversify (Hamid, Asia-Pacific). Reform must deliver concrete commitments on technology transfer and policy space to enable these economies to move beyond raw material exports toward value-added production (Hamid, Asia-Pacific) (Jiokeng, Africa).



Updating IP and IT Frameworks: In pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, contributors called for strengthening the “functional balance between innovation, sustainable development, and public welfare,” particularly through clearer TRIPS flexibilities and coordinated frameworks for technology transfer and voluntary licensing that ensure critical health technologies can be disseminated rapidly, especially in public health emergencies (Elsun, Europe). The same logic of updating frameworks to reflect modern realities applies to the Information Technology Agreement, which must be expanded to cover 21st century technologies such as drones and 3D printers (Natnicha, Asia-Pacific).

4. Modernizing Rules on Subsidies and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)

The rise of non-market practices and massive industrial subsidies has undermined trust in the concept of a level playing field, forcing a confrontation between traditional trade rules and modern state-led economic strategies.

Clarity on Subsidies: The rise of industrial subsidies and non-market practices has created “severe imbalances in addressing overcapacity, economic security, and supply chain vulnerabilities” (Riya, North America). Several contributors argued that these developments have weakened confidence in the WTO’s ability to ensure fair competition, with some describing them as “anti-free market practices” that erode the organization’s foundational framework (AJ, North America) (Yanis, Asia-Pacific).

Standardized Guardrails: To restore institutional credibility, contributors called for updating rules on subsidies and state-owned enterprises to ensure transparent, standardized protocols across all members, prioritizing “rigorous auditing and efficiency analysis” to curb distortions while preserving the policy space needed for development-oriented industrial transformation (Yanis, Asia-Pacific).

Recommendations

- Surround the security exception with hard guardrails and public justification requirements to prevent strategic abuse.
- Deliver transparent, fair rules on critical minerals that restrain harmful export restrictions while promoting local processing and responsible investment.
- Deliver concrete commitments on technology transfer and policy space to enable developing economies to move beyond raw material exports toward value-added production.
- Strengthen TRIPS flexibilities and establish coordinated frameworks for technology transfer and voluntary licensing to ensure rapid dissemination of critical health technologies.
- Update rules on subsidies and state-owned enterprises to ensure transparent, standardized protocols and rigorous auditing across all members.
- Expand the Information Technology Agreement to cover 21st century technologies such as drones and 3D printers.

C. Sustainability, Climate Action, and the Green Transition: Who Pays for the Future?

As the consequences of climate change reshape global trade and production, young people increasingly view its governance as an immediate priority. There is a shared view that the WTO should be a pioneer in establishing a clear relationship between sustainability and trade, helping build “a global economy powered by clean, cheap, and abundant energy” (Charlotte, North America).

1. Green Technology: Democratizing Innovation or Deepening Inequality?

The governance of green technology supply chains – who innovates, who manufactures, who benefits – represents a defining trade-climate question for this generation. Without meaningful technology transfer and subsidy reform, the green transition risks perpetuating inequalities.

Democratization through Coordinated Technology Transfer: To ensure the green transition does not deepen the gap between developed and developing economies, the WTO must facilitate the smooth cross-border transfer of climate mitigation technologies (Hatice, Europe). This means “democratizing” green technologies by making them replicable and easier to export (Charlotte, North America), including through a revitalized Environmental Goods Agreement that lowers tariffs on green technologies (Tom, North America) (Natnicha, Asia-Pacific).

Reforming Subsidy Disciplines and the “Welfare Value” of Trade: While the rise of industrial subsidies and non-market practices poses broader challenges to fair competition (addressed supra), the environmental context adds a further layer of complexity. The WTO must establish a multilateral framework that differentiates between protectionist policies and sound environmental incentives, one that ensures green initiatives function as tools for climate progress (Hatice, Europe). This means creating specific exceptions to GATT disciplines for subsidies that explicitly promote sustainability, and reorienting the system toward “maximizing the welfare value of trade for people and the planet” (Tom, North America).

2. Environmental Trade Measures: Climate Ambition as Potential Market Access Barrier


Carbon border measures, due diligence policies, and sustainability standards have emerged as the most contested climate-trade interfaces across submissions.

The Disproportionate Burden of Compliance Costs: Carbon border measures impose disproportionate burdens on lower-emitting developing economies that depend on export-led growth to “sustain economic growth and finance the well-being of their citizens” (Gabriela, Latin America and the Caribbean). Those least responsible for the climate crisis face the steepest trade-linked consequences – “not because of weaker climate ambition, but because of structural capacity constraints” (Shilpa, Europe). Without recalibration, these measures risk “restricting their access to markets and limiting their capacity to invest in sustainable development” (Gabriela, Latin America and the Caribbean).

Sustainability Standards Without Support: At the firm level, proliferating sustainability standards create regulatory fragmentation that generates “unnecessary trade costs,” falling hardest on developing economies, MSMEs, and women traders “confronted with increasing technical complexity and limited compliance infrastructure” (Ibrahima, Africa). Without targeted capacity-building, the frontline producers at the beginning of the value chain are effectively excluded, making “access to quality training on tools and methodologies to fulfill sustainability standards and conduct adequate due diligence” a prerequisite for participation in export markets (Andrea, Latin America and the Caribbean).

3. Stronger Integration of Climate-Trade Frameworks

Contributors call on the WTO to evolve from observer to active driver of the green transition, providing developing economies with the policy flexibility and institutional support needed for effective climate action.



Climate Transition Support Mechanism: Contributors across regions proposed an “Aid for Trade” equivalent specifically adapted for the green transition, providing coordinated financing and technical assistance to developing economies navigating climate-related compliance (Iniyaa, Asia-Pacific). This includes support for emissions measurement infrastructure and simplified reporting for MSMEs, ensuring that climate-related trade measures serve as tools for transition rather than de facto trade barriers (Shilpa, Europe). The WTO mechanism would review such measures for “proportionality, transparency, and development sensitivity,” with formal links to UNFCCC processes to ensure the two negotiating tracks stop operating in isolation (Shilpa, Europe) (Hatice, Europe) (Ibrahima, Africa).

Indigenous and Community Knowledge Must Be Centered: [The LAC Youth Consultation on Global Trade and Climate Justice](#) (October 2025), which brought together more than 40 young leaders and nine partner organizations across Latin America, delivered a clear message from young people in the region: trade systems must adapt to indigenous communities, not the other way around. Despite playing central roles in bio-economies and nature-based value chains, indigenous communities remain largely excluded from the institutions that govern international trade, including climate finance mechanisms and trade literacy initiatives that fail to reflect their realities and knowledge systems.

Recommendations

- Facilitate the smooth cross-border transfer of climate mitigation technologies.
- Democratize green technologies by making them replicable and easier to export through a revitalized Environmental Goods Agreement that lowers tariffs on green technologies.
- Create specific exceptions to GATT disciplines for subsidies that explicitly promote sustainability.
- Create a climate transition support mechanism that provides coordinated financing and technical assistance to developing economies navigating climate-related compliance, including support for emissions measurement infrastructure and simplified reporting for MSMEs.
- Review climate-related trade measures for proportionality, transparency, and development sensitivity.
- Further alignment of WTO and UNFCCC processes is necessary to ensure the two negotiating tracks operate in a mutually coherent and coordinated manner, building on the cooperation that has already been established.
- Center indigenous and community knowledge in trade-climate governance, ensuring that climate finance mechanisms and trade literacy initiatives reflect indigenous realities and knowledge systems.

D. Bridging the Digital Divide in Global Trade Governance

The digital economy is the present in which most young people already operate. Across submissions, youth perspectives divide between those prioritizing liberalization and those insisting that without a development dimension, digital trade rules will reproduce existing inequalities in a new domain.

1. The E-Commerce Moratorium: Establishing Certainty as a Public Good

The moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions is the most directly contested digital trade issue in the submissions, and the uncertainty surrounding its renewal has become a structural problem in its own right.

Commercial Survival for Youth-Led Digital Businesses: The submissions argue that imposing digital tariffs would “increase costs [and] reduce competitiveness” for youth-led ventures, deterring entrepreneurship in ways that are disproportionate and cumulative (Anya, Asia-Pacific). Young people see the moratorium as a “matter of survival for our startups” in Africa, arguing that its protection, alongside simplified mobile payment rules, is foundational to the ability of young entrepreneurs to compete in global digital markets (Jessica, Africa).

Between Openness and Inequality: Some young people warn that extending the moratorium without addressing developing economy concerns risks “widening the digital divide, reinforcing an uneven playing field, and perpetuating revenue losses” (Marygold, Africa). At the same time, others note that the moratorium helps keep digital trade open and affordable for developing economies (Elizabeth, Africa), while continued deferral of the issue creates uncertainty that the digital economy can ill afford (Marygold, Africa).

2. The Bilateral Approach of Data Governance

Young people’s concern is that the absence of multilateral rules on cross-border data flows actively pushes developing economies into bilateral negotiations where structural disadvantages and power asymmetries are systematically present.

Unequal Bargaining in the Digital Economy: A multilateral digital trade framework with minimum procedural standards for data flow commitments, such as requirements for independent regulatory assessment, is necessary (Muhammad, Asia-Pacific). This is essential because, as multilateral rules weaken, developing economies are often pressured into accepting unfair trade commitments without reciprocal institutional safeguards, deepening the “asymmetry between large digital economies and emerging ones” and leaving them in a “position of structural disadvantage” (Muhammad, Asia-Pacific).

Protecting Regulatory Policy Space: Contributors emphasized that digital trade rules should support inclusive participation in the global economy while remaining responsive to development concerns. They argued that future WTO frameworks should preserve regulatory flexibility, incorporate technical assistance and capacity-building, and address the unequal conditions facing developing and least-developed economies (Natnicha, Asia-Pacific) (Anya, Asia-Pacific) (Qiuxian, Europe). Several stressed that digital trade governance must promote affordable and predictable access to global digital markets for young people while ensuring that “digital exclusion” does not become a “permanent structural feature of the global economy” (Qiuxian, Europe) (Anya, Asia-Pacific).

3. The Digital Divide: Financing Infrastructure Gaps

The persistence of structural asymmetries in infrastructure, connectivity, digital payments, and skills means that many young entrepreneurs remain unable to participate fully in the digital economy. A common concern is that infrastructure and connectivity gaps are among the primary constraints on digital trade participation for young people in developing economies (Rebecca, Africa) (Jessica, Africa).



Payment Fragmentation and Market Exclusions: In Africa, simplified mobile payment rules and an Investment Facilitation Agreement aligned with the African Continental Free Trade Area would be “transformative,” as aligning rules with the AfCFTA means a “young developer in Douala would finally be able to compete with a company in Geneva or Singapore” (Jessica, Africa). Digital connectivity and reduced trade costs are “determinant” factors and preconditions for MSMEs in structurally disadvantaged economies to participate in international trade flows (Abdelkhader, Africa).

Closing the Participation Gap: Young people identify “connectivity gaps, regulatory capacity deficits, and skills shortages” as structural barriers preventing developing economy actors from participating in digital trade on equitable terms. In regions like Latin America and the Caribbean, there are still deep gaps in connectivity, infrastructure and training in digital skills that must be addressed to ensure technological transformation does not “widen inequalities instead of reducing them” (Helen, Latin America and the Caribbean).

Recommendations

- Restore the e-commerce moratorium and simplify mobile payment rules to keep digital trade open and affordable for young entrepreneurs.
- Create a multilateral digital trade framework with minimum procedural standards for data flow commitments, including independent regulatory assessment.
- Preserve governments’ capacity to pursue legitimate objectives on privacy, national security, and digital industrial strategy, with technical assistance and capacity-building for developing and least-developed economies.
- Address connectivity gaps, regulatory capacity deficits, and skills shortages to ensure technological transformation does not entrench “digital exclusion” as a permanent structural feature of the global economy.

E. Restoring Legitimacy to the Multilateral Trading Order

Youth contributions framed WTO reform as a question of whether multilateral trade can still command trust. The political context has shifted: geopolitical rivalry, fragmented supply chains, uneven development, and skepticism toward global institutions have all changed what Members expect from the system. The common diagnosis was a crisis of confidence in enforcement, in the capacity for negotiation, and in shared values.

1. Restoring Dispute Settlement is a Necessary Condition

The Appellate Body paralysis is where the institutional credibility crisis is most visible, and it appears across submissions from every region as the most urgent reform priority.

The Appeal into the Void: The current possibility to appeal into the void has shifted enforcement toward power-based dynamics, with disproportionate consequences for smaller economies that cannot secure fair outcomes bilaterally (Adhitheya, Asia-Pacific). Contributors point to the MPIA as demonstrating an appetite for resolve (Nikola, Europe).

Need for Restoration: A credible dispute settlement mechanism is widely viewed as the foundation on which the broader trading system depends (Ilia, Africa). At the same time, contributors argued that the problem extends beyond dispute settlement alone: strict consensus rules and asymmetries in negotiating power complicate the decision-making process, meaning that restoring dispute settlement, while necessary, will not by itself resolve the WTO's broader governance challenges (Nicole, Middle East).

2. Reforming the Negotiation Process

Consensus-based decision-making has preserved formal equality while resulting in a difficulty in producing timely decisions, and contributors call for reform.


Rethinking Consensus: While having success in producing major agreements, this procedural rigidity has transformed the WTO's member-driven mandate into a system that limits progress, allowing the consensus rule to function as a "tool for obstruction rather than cooperation" (Nicole, Middle East).

Plurilateralism as Opportunity and Risk: The flexibility in process must not translate into exclusion in outcomes; reformed processes must remain genuinely multilateral (Bonk, Europe) (Shine, Asia-Pacific).

3. Redefining the Role of the WTO

Underlying many of the proposals for reform is a broader debate about the WTO's purpose. While the WTO was created to promote predictability and economic integration, many young contributors argue that its legitimacy today depends on whether it can also respond to the social, developmental, and environmental challenges Members face.

Market Outcomes to Distributive Justice: Contributors argue that the WTO must "move beyond a narrow focus on market outcomes" and instead "incorporate principles of distributive justice and participatory governance into its institutional design" (Shekinah, Asia-Pacific). Trade governance is increasingly evaluated not only by its contribution to economic growth, but also by its ability to address structural imbalances and ensure that the benefits of trade are more broadly shared. For many young people, the system's relevance depends on whether it is seen as a "platform for resilience and opportunity" rather than a source of "persistent inequality" (Nyasha, Africa) (Bernsy, Latin America and the Caribbean).



Moving Beyond Liberalization as the End Goal: Contributors repeatedly reject the notion that trade should “exist for its own sake” (Nicole, Middle East). Instead, they view trade as a means of advancing broader objectives, including peace, cooperation, development, and shared prosperity (Ramkumar, Asia-Pacific). In this vision, the WTO’s role should still continue to facilitate economic integration while also serving as a “connective bridge” that balances “sovereignty with cooperation” and “resilience with openness” to help members address challenges ranging from development gaps to the climate transition (Michidmaa, Africa) (Hatice, Europe). The institution’s future legitimacy, contributors suggest, will depend on its ability to reconcile these objectives within an increasingly complex global economy.

Recommendations

- Restore a credible dispute settlement mechanism, building on initiatives like the MPIA as a stimulus for dispute settlement and broader institutional reform.
- Reform consensus-based decision-making to enhance decision-making efficiency, ensuring flexibility in process does not translate into exclusion in outcomes.
- Move beyond a narrow focus on market outcomes and incorporate principles of distributive justice and participatory governance into institutional design.
- Reorient the WTO as a connective bridge – balancing sovereignty with cooperation and resilience with openness– to address development, climate, and governance challenges alongside economic integration.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The submissions collected through the consultation do not point toward a single reform agenda. Contributors disagree on the WTO's core purpose, on how far security exceptions should extend, on whether the e-commerce moratorium serves or undermines development, and on who should bear the costs of the green transition. But they share a conviction that the current situation is unsustainable, and the priorities below reflect where that conviction is strongest.

Trade governance and equity: make flexibility real. S&DT is the report's most consistent frustration. The problem is how it is implemented: transition periods do not reflect actual development conditions, flexibilities exist only on paper without enforcement mechanisms, and negotiating formats systematically exclude developing economies. Making S&DT work requires moving toward a calibrated, needs-based approach that tailors flexibilities, transition periods, and compliance obligations to countries' actual capacities while making S&DT more operational and supportive of economic transformation. It also means reforming the negotiating culture itself by limiting exclusive informal formats like "green rooms."

Industrial transformation: update the rulebook. The rules on subsidies, state-owned enterprises, critical minerals, and technology transfer were designed for a different era of globalization. As major economies pursue strategic industrial policies, resource-rich developing nations risk capturing less of the value from their own resources. Updating the Information Technology Agreement, establishing transparent disciplines on critical mineral supply chains that support local processing, and clarifying TRIPS flexibilities for health and green technologies are all steps the WTO can take within its existing mandate.

Climate: act before unilateral measures become the default. Carbon border adjustment and other climate policies are already reshaping market access for developing economy exporters. To address the most immediate asymmetries, a dedicated support mechanism is needed, covering emissions measurement, technical assistance for MSMEs, and recognition of national climate commitments in compliance assessments. Further aligning WTO and UNFCCC processes would ensure that the two tracks do not operate in isolation, ensuring trade measures are assessed for their development implications and climate commitments for their trade effects. Indigenous and community knowledge needs to be integrated into this architecture from the outset.

Digital trade: protect participation while the rules are being written. For young entrepreneurs in developing economies, the e-commerce moratorium is foundational. Its renewal should be treated as urgent. The broader problem is the absence of multilateral rules on data flows, which pushes smaller economies into bilateral negotiations where the structural disadvantages are significant. A multilateral framework with minimum procedural standards, including independent regulatory assessment, would give developing-economy governments more room to manoeuvre. Connectivity gaps, regulatory capacity deficits, and skills shortages all require parallel attention; digital trade rules that ignore infrastructure realities will widen the inequalities they were meant to reduce.

Institutional reform: start with dispute settlement. Institutional reform must begin with restoring confidence in the WTO itself. Across regions, young people identified the paralysis of the Appellate Body as the clearest manifestation of the organization's credibility crisis, warning that the ability to appeal into the void has shifted enforcement toward power-based bargaining that disproportionately disadvantages smaller economies. Yet contributors also emphasized that dispute settlement is only part of the challenge: consensus-based decision-making, while having succeeded in producing major agreements such as the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, is seen as contributing to slower decision-making in a context where prompt responses are often necessary. The WTO must therefore restore a credible dispute settlement system while simultaneously developing decision-making processes that can deliver results, including by ensuring all members, especially smaller and developing economies, remain meaningful participants in shaping outcomes.

A Note on Youth participation: from Consultation to Co-authorship

Across all five areas, contributors returned to the same questions: who shapes the rules, whose interests are reflected in them, and who is excluded from the rooms where decisions are made. Institutionalizing youth consultation in WTO working groups and Ministerial Conference preparations, and creating pathways for young trade professionals from all economies to participate in technical negotiations, would begin to close the gap between who makes trade rules and who lives with their consequences.

These are not separate problems with separate solutions. They are different expressions of the same underlying question: whether the multilateral trading system can adapt quickly enough to remain the framework within which economies manage their economic relationships, or whether that role passes to bilateral deals, regional arrangements, and unilateral measures. This generation will inherit whichever answer emerges.

Highlights from Around the World

“African creative industries – music, film, fashion, digital culture – demonstrate it clearly ... Afrobeats streaming worldwide, Nollywood reaching new platforms ... yet the multilateral system has no serious framework for the infrastructure that makes them possible.”

(Shalom, Africa)

“In Assam, tea is more than an export commodity; it is livelihood, legacy, and local economy intertwined ... Agriculture becomes associated with uncertainty, while urban employment appears comparatively secure. The result is gradual youth disengagement from traditional cultivation and increased migration.”

(Rajguru, Asia-Pacific)

“For young people, stable expectations underpin investment, employment, and technological progress. If trade rules become politicized or selectively applied, volatility increases and long-term opportunities become sparse. A rules-based system provides the certainty necessary to plan careers, innovate, and build resilient economies for the future.”

(Filip, Europe)

“Haiti provides a real case study of how global trade rules can shape the lives of young people. The imbalance is extreme: exports to our neighbor were roughly 5 million USD ... while imports reached USD 997 million, leaving Haitian producers and entrepreneurs at a significant disadvantage”

(Bernsy, Latin America and the Caribbean).

“Working at my family’s business during COVID, repairing swimming pools and hot tub machinery, I had to have countless difficult conversations with customers about why our prices were suddenly so high. The reality of today’s interdependent global economy means that the free trade system will impact every facet of our lives. For no one is this more true than the young”

(Murray, North America).

