The WTO has been facing increasing challenges since 2008. The ensuing economic crisis, distortive rescue measures, anti-globalization backlash, the failure of the Doha Round and rising trade tensions among Members. All that, combined with the more recent Covid 19 crisis, have confronted the WTO with unprecedented threats. Ideally the Organization should have been able to manage those challenges with its built-in institutional capabilities represented in its three vital functions namely, the oversight function, the negotiating function, and dispute settlement. However, the three functions have broken down, one after the other.

For the past five years, political leaders (G20, G7 and others) have been stressing the urgent need for necessary WTO reform. Structured discussions have been taking place in other forums including the latest G20 meeting in Sorrento and concrete initiatives have been put forward (e.g., the G20 Riyadh initiative) identifying priority issues for discussion and resolution, emphasising that any reforms can only be decided by the WTO itself. However, to date, there is yet to be a structured process in the WTO to address the reform agenda. For several years, the WTO has been in a crisis management mode focused on short term accomplishments. In other words, the urgent always came before the important. Now, the important should be seen as the most urgent if there is a will to save the system from sinking into irrelevancy.

MC 12 represents an opportunity for WTO Members to take a collective decision to start such a structured process. Ideally, Members should have been investing time and effort over the past six months to develop an insightful agenda that reflects a political vision for how the reform process should unfold. At this point in time, it is too late for any such agenda to be ready for MC 12. However, it is not too late to aim for a simple agreement among Members to start such a process post MC 12. This could be achieved at a high level of generality that covers only essential elements of strategic guidance, such as:

- Recall the common purpose of the WTO and its objectives enshrined in the Marrakesh Agreement (securing stability and predictability of trading conditions through a rules-based system)
- Reaffirm the foundational principles of the WTO (transparency, non-discrimination, fair competition, inclusiveness, special and differential treatment, sustainability etc…)
- Affirm the need for a wholistic approach to WTO reform to address issues relating to the three vital functions:
  - The oversight function by regular WTO bodies (Councils and committees) entailing transparency, notifications, cross-notifications, monitoring, cooperation with other International Organizations, deliberating specific trade concerns raised by Members, as well as discussing new issues or any matters raised by any Member that affect the functioning of WTO Agreements or the attainment of their objectives.
➢ The **negotiating function** and its operation, including clarifying existing rules regarding different types of negotiating processes and outcomes, the application of special and differential treatment for developing countries and LDCs as well capacity building strategies to mitigate the negotiating capacity inequality across the Membership.

➢ The **dispute settlement function** (reviewing the operation of the DSU, reforming the functioning of the AB)

This process could be taken forward by a Working Party to develop an agenda by a specific date in the first half of 2022, with a view to developing recommendations by MC 13.

Such a process will no doubt be challenging and would require clear political vision of what the WTO of the future should look like, as well as a great deal of thought leadership to anchor political solutions in sound substantive and technical details.