

**Intergovernmental Group of Experts on
E-commerce and the Digital Economy**
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Statement by

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNCTAD.

***Draft speaking points for the Chair of the First Meeting of
the Working Group on Measuring E-Commerce
and the Digital Economy,
3-4 December 2019***

Excellencies, delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to report to this Group of Experts on the first meeting of the Working Group on Measuring E-Commerce and the Digital Economy. The meeting was held on 3-4 December 2019 in Geneva.

At this first meeting, 126 registered participants attended, representing 46 countries, international organizations and other stakeholders.

The meeting addressed two main substantive issues that had been proposed by experts at the third session of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy.

The first issue concerned the revision of the UNCTAD Manual for the Production of Statistics on the Information Economy, which had most recently been updated in 2009. The Secretariat noted that the revised Manual should reflect changes in the digital economy landscape of the past 10 years. In particular, it should add more coverage and guidance on the areas of e-commerce, trade in ICT services and ICT-enabled services. The

revised version would serve as a key input for capacity-building efforts aimed at enabling more developing countries to collect relevant statistics for the digital economy. It was also stressed that this new Manual would serve as a complement to other statistical Manuals produced by members of the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development.

Many useful comments were received from various experts. Among other things, it was recommended that the revised Manual should ensure international comparability by using agreed definitions and standards. Experts were encouraged that the new Manual would be touching on new areas, even those pending a well-developed statistical framework. The revised Manual would include several model questionnaires as reference for member States. Additional comments were made on the importance of data collection, the scope of surveys, statistical dissemination, metadata and institutional cooperation. There were also calls for more capacity-building and awareness-raising activities to give the revised Manual widespread attention among relevant institutions in member States.

The revised version of the Manual should be published in 2020 and will include the inputs provided by the Working Group. A very advanced draft has been made available by the Secretariat for this session.

The second substantive issue focused on the measurement of domestic and cross-border e-commerce. Participants acknowledged the importance of better measurement of this area

in order to identify challenges and opportunities and to formulate evidence-based policies and regulations. They also recognized the need for international cooperation and the role of the Working Group in supporting member states' data collection efforts.

Two main approaches to collecting e-commerce data through surveys were highlighted: (i) adding questions to existing household and enterprise surveys, and (ii) setting up stand-alone surveys. Depending on the country, both options could be relevant. Experts noted, however, that surveys only measure a part of the e-commerce landscape, and there were numerous concerns regarding data collection. For example, micro enterprises are often excluded from surveys although they have a lot to gain from e-commerce and other opportunities in the digital economy, particularly in developing countries. Consumer-to-consumer e-commerce was typically not being measured in official statistics, yet this has become an important component, especially in developing countries. I should add that the COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated rapid growth in online activities among people. Both government and private sectors are therefore in urgent need of digital economy data for adjusting policies and making decisions. Still, due to the impact of the pandemic, the National Statistical Offices (NSOs) in developing countries have encountered serious physical constraints in collecting data which causes delays in statistical production in general.

Participants discussed several possible solutions, including enhanced collaboration, both between international organizations and governments and within countries, to produce reliable and useful data on e-commerce and the digital economy. At the national level, cooperation between the ICT regulator and NSO

was highlighted as good practice, including for the funding of surveys. Cooperation with the private sector as both data providers and users was also underlined.

Following the discussion on these two substantive issues, experts were invited to share their ideas on future topics for discussion by the Working Group. Several experts proposed that there should be a regular update on activities by other international organizations that related to the measurement of e-commerce and the digital economy. Other suggestions related to specific methodological challenges that countries faced in this domain.

In terms of modalities, the Secretariat was encouraged to explore ways of expanding the number of representatives from all regions, and especially from NSOs. It was suggested that UNCTAD should raise awareness of this new Working Group through relevant regional meetings of statisticians. Experts also proposed that an online forum be put in place by UNCTAD in order to facilitate discussions between annual meetings.

My report from the first meeting, which can be found in document TD/B/EDE/4/3, proposes for your consideration the following conclusions from the first meeting of the Working Group:

- *Welcome* the UNCTAD Manual on the Production of Digital Economy Statistics 2020 and *recommend* that countries consider using the new Manual in the production of official statistics on e-commerce and the digital economy. By aiming to improve and harmonize methodology, the Manual can raise the quality and international comparability of digital economy statistics.

- *Encourage* development partners to provide funding for the development of training and for the provision of other technical assistance based on the new Manual.
- *Request* that the Working Group continue its collaboration with other international organizations, including the Partnership on Measuring ICT for Development, to build on each other's work and make the best use of resources for research, methodological development, and capacity-building activities.
- *Request* that UNCTAD explore setting up an online forum for continued informal discussions of the Working Group in between annual meetings, subject to resources.

In terms of *possible topics* for the second meeting of the Working Group, the following three topics are proposed for your consideration based on the discussions during its first meeting:

- Progress in measuring e-commerce and the digital economy work by relevant international organizations;
- Next steps in the implementation of the revised UNCTAD Manual on the Production of Digital Economy Statistics; and
- The use of non-survey sources of data to supplement the traditional measurement of e-commerce and the digital economy.

I would like to further emphasize that the three proposed topics should incorporate the issue relating to impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for discussion in the upcoming Working Group meeting.

Before closing, I would like to thank the Vice-Chair, Mr. Mark Uhrbach, Chief of Digital Economy Metrics at Statistics Canada, for his helpful and constructive support throughout the session. I am also grateful for the active involvement of delegates attending the meeting. Finally, let me express my appreciation for the support extended by the UNCTAD Secretariat in the preparation and implementation of the first meeting of this new Working Group.

Thank you for your attention.