Non-paper
18 November 2026

Trade and Development Board
Working Group on Measuring E-commerce and the Digital Economy
Seventh meeting
Geneva, 3 – 4 December 2026

Moving WG-ECDE meetings online

Financial barriers to in-person attendance in Geneva are contributing to declining participation in the Working Group on Measuring E-commerce and the Digital Economy (WG-ECDE) and preventing countries that have expressed a wish to participate from doing so. This non-paper proposes addressing these barriers by enabling the Working Group to meet online, creating a more inclusive platform that broadens the technical discussion beyond a group of delegates able to travel to Geneva.

The proposed change would reconstitute the WG-ECDE as an informal technical working group while maintaining its technical focus, its operational continuity and reporting link to the Intergovernmental Group of Experts (IGE) on E-commerce and the Digital Economy. While formal UN-provided interpretation would not be available in this format, digital language tools would facilitate cross-language participation, while regular reporting to the IGE would ensure the Group's technical outputs retain their visibility and relevance within intergovernmental processes.

Decision requested: The Working Group is invited to discuss the proposal to reconstitute the WG-ECDE as an *informal technical working group* convened by UNCTAD, with meetings normally being held online. If the proposal is supported, the Working Group is invited to recommend that the IGE endorse this change.

Written feedback is also encouraged via emeasurement@unctad.org by 31 December 2026.

Introduction

Established in 2019 under the Intergovernmental Group of Experts (IGE) on E-commerce and the Digital Economy, the Working Group on Measuring E-commerce and the Digital Economy (WG-ECDE) brings together statistical compilers and other experts from national statistical offices, central banks and other relevant agencies to exchange experiences, discuss measurement challenges and identify capacity-building needs.

Meetings of the WG-ECDE take place annually in-person at the United Nations in Geneva. Remote access is limited to an audio stream, which does not enable experts to view presentations, intervene or ask questions. The restriction to audio undermines its usefulness for following the meeting remotely.

Virtual and hybrid meeting modalities were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic as exceptional measures to ensure continuity. Their continued use for United Nations intergovernmental calendar meetings beyond that context requires an affirmative mandate from Member States through the General Assembly, including agreement on the relevant legal and technical arrangements. In the absence of a general mandate authorizing their continued use, in-person participation remains the default modality for such meetings. In practice, this precludes an intergovernmental working group such as the WG-ECDE from convening its meetings in a virtual or hybrid format.

The impact

Statistical practitioners contribute national experiences and articulate capacity-building priorities that inform the Working Group's technical discussions. Broad participation by these experts is therefore essential to the Group's effectiveness.

However, travel, accommodation and subsistence costs in Geneva prevent many experts from attending. These barriers affect least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States especially hard but also constrain participation by experts from other developing economies as well as developed economies.

Amid ongoing United Nations liquidity pressures and broader reductions in donor funding, extrabudgetary resources have only occasionally allowed UNCTAD to support a limited number of participants, but this cannot be relied upon from year to year. Where funding does become available, it generally does so at short notice, limiting the ability for careful advance planning. Reflecting this tighter financial environment, no extrabudgetary funding has been available in 2026, and prospects for sustained travel support remain constrained.

As a result, attendance records have shown progressive declines in the numbers of experts and of Member States able to participate in the WG-ECDE. In particular, there is a wide gap between interest in attending, as indicated by the number of online registrations received, and the eventual number of participants present in Geneva.

Online meetings would reduce travel-related barriers and could enable several experts from the same institution to contribute, broadening the range of technical expertise and geographic representation available to the Working Group.

A proposed solution

It is proposed to reconstitute the WG-ECDE as an *informal technical working group* convened by UNCTAD, with meetings normally held online. In-person or hybrid meetings could also be convened where resources permit and where this would best serve the work of the Working Group; these would remain non-calendar

meetings of the informal technical working group. The Working Group's substantive focus on experience-sharing and capacity-building needs in the field of digital economy measurement will be fully maintained.

The WG-ECDE would continue to report its technical findings and recommendations for consideration by the IGE. Existing procedures for the nomination of participants to the Working Group would remain unchanged.

Operational considerations

To support broad, inclusive participation under an informal online format, the Working Group would put in place the following practical arrangements:

1. Built-in digital language tools on online meeting platforms would facilitate cross-language participation.

2. Regular reporting of technical findings, reports, and recommendations to the IGE would preserve the Group's visibility and institutional link to intergovernmental processes following its shift to informal status.

3. Meeting arrangements would take account of time-zone differences with the aim of maximizing participation across all regions.

For discussion

The Working Group is invited to discuss the proposed change of status and, if supported, to recommend that the IGE should endorse it.

Written feedback is also encouraged via emeasurement@unctad.org, by 31 December 2026.