

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

United Kingdom

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

Opening Plenary

The unprecedented disruption by COVID-19 has seen an acceleration in the digitalisation of economies around the world - disrupting traditional business models and favouring the virtual over the physical.

As the global economy seeks to recover from the pandemic, it is vital that we use this an opportunity to “build back better” and ensure that value is created and captured sustainably around the world.

Data is the lifeblood of today’s digital economy. It is a valuable resource for businesses and organisations to allow them to create dynamic and competitive digital markets and encourage the development of better services and operations for users and beneficiaries.

Data produces value when it can be used to analyse and provide greater insight into what works and what does not – both in terms of selling products and services, and in terms of making our own processes and practices more efficient.

However, there is increasing evidence to suggest the full value of data is not being realised across economies due to vital information not getting to where it needs to be – obstacles including, monopolisation and imperfect information.

For data to have both impact and value, the United Kingdom believe it needs to be appropriately collected, accessible, mobile and re-usable. This requires encouraging better coordination, access to and sharing quality data between organisations in the public, private and third sector, and ensuring appropriate and proportionate protections for the flow of data– fuelling growth, innovation and development across an economy.

UNCTAD E-commerce week and this Group of Experts provide an opportunity for members to exchange ideas on how to enhance the development gains from e-commerce. The UK believe that engaging in this way is vital for laying the groundwork for an inclusive global framework for e-commerce.

Session 3

Digital platforms have an important role to play in supporting online trade and enabling participation in the digital economy - connecting businesses and consumers, facilitating online transactions, and opening new opportunities in both domestic and international markets.

The existence of digital platforms, however, is not in itself enough to guarantee positive outcomes.

It is also vital that countries have the connectivity, the skills, the awareness, and the wider enabling environment in place to ensure that benefits are created – including for those in society for whom the benefits can be greatest.

For example, digital platforms have the potential to create significant opportunities for women, enabling flexible working, increasing access to essential goods and services, and lowering financial and social barriers to participation in trade.

However, a significant digital gender divide means women are up to 33% less likely to be connected to the internet than men in the poorest countries, and generally have lower levels digital literacy.

Through our SheTrades Commonwealth programme, the UK is supporting women-owned businesses to take advantage of online trading opportunities, including through the use of digital platforms.

This work is particularly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is helping these businesses to adapt their operating models and maintain client bases during global lockdowns.

Harnessing partnerships with the private sector, one of our programmes recently delivered a series of webinars in partnership with Facebook Developers Circle and Google Business Group, focused on using global digital platforms such as Google My Business, WhatsApp for Business, and Instagram to better market their goods and services.

The UK is also working with developing countries to leverage local digital platforms to meet development needs, adapted to the local digital environment.

For example, in partnership with Unilever, the UK's TRANSFORM programme funds Kasha, an e-commerce platform for women's health and personal care operating in East Africa, which allows women of all socioeconomic levels to confidentially order products including menstrual care and contraceptives.

The Kasha platform is accessible without internet access or smartphone, requiring only a basic mobile phone to browse through products, order and pay.

Session 5

The United Kingdom wants to work openly and collaboratively with others who share our digital vision; for a world where digital technology will be accessible to all, and where no one will be left behind.

The United Kingdom is keen to engage further and wider with the development community on digital solutions to help ensure more joined up collaborative approaches - having a collective approach to policy including personal data protection, security and privacy issues is one of the best ways to improve capacity building in this area.

For example, the UK is a founder member of the Digital Impact Alliance (DIAL), a multi-donor initiative set up to address digital challenges that no single actor or sector can tackle alone. DIAL is uniquely positioned to serve as a neutral broker, bringing together government, industry, donors, NGOs and other development stakeholders in the digital ecosystem to advance digital inclusion and achieve SDGs.

The UK is also a strong supporter of modern and ambitious digital provisions in international trade. As the digital economy continues to rapidly develop around areas such as Big Data, Artificial

Intelligence and the Internet of Things, it is vital that trade rules are modern and ambitious enough to foster continued innovation and drive inclusiveness, while ensuring consumers have appropriate protections.

Other delegations have mentioned the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions. We see great economic benefit in the moratorium, and look forward to discussing further at the World Trade Organisation in the run up to the 12th Ministerial Conference.