COMMISSION ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPMENT (CSTD)

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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS during the past 20 years

Submission by

International Trade Centre

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the CSTD secretariat that will inform the substantive discussion at the CSTD on the progress made in the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS during the past 20 years during its 28th annual session in April 2025, in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution E/RES/2023/3, to the CSTD to conduct such substantive discussions and to report thereon, through the Economic and Social Council, to the General Assembly.

United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development

Twenty years in the implementation of outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

WSIS+20 Reporting Template

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Role of respondent: Senior Adviser

Date of response: 13th November 2024

I. What is your organisation's formal role and responsibilities concerning WSIS implementation?

a. Mandates of your organization relevant to the WSIS implementation

The International Trade Centre (ITC) supports the WSIS implementation by enhancing digital skills and promoting e-business for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) globally. ITC focuses on Action Line C7 (eBusiness), working to improve SME competitiveness in digital markets, facilitate e-commerce, and foster inclusive trade through digitalization, contributing to sustainable development goals.

b. Brief History of your organization's contribution to the World Summit on the information Society (WSIS)

The International Trade Centre (ITC) has actively contributed to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) since its inception, aligning its work on e-business and digital trade with WSIS objectives. ITC's contribution began in the early 2000s, focusing on enabling small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to access digital markets and integrate into the global economy through digital channels, including support of access to digitally based trade data and improved policies toward digital trade.

c. Implementation processes and initiatives within your organization and/or in partnership with other organisations

II. What have been your organization's main contributions to the direct implementation of the WSIS outcomes and related areas of digital development since the Summit, particularly since 2015?

a. WSIS Action Lines (as lead, co-facilitator or supporting participant)

Co- facilitator of Action Line C7 (eBusiness)

b. WSIS-related projects

In 2022 ITC launched the "Digital Moonshot", an ambitious initiative aimed at connecting 20,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to digital markets by 2025. The initiative focuses on enhancing digital skills, facilitating access to e-commerce platforms, and policy to support digital trade. It seeks to empower SMEs by providing the tools, training, and policies needed to navigate and thrive in the digital economy, with the ultimate goal of fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth through digitalization. Under this strategic programme, many projects incorporate a digital dimension – whether in the form of utilising data for better trade, assisting governments and institutions to understand and develop policy for digital trade, institutions to support digitalisation or entrepreneurs and small businesses to seize the opportunity of the evolving digital economy.

https://www.intracen.org/our-work/topics/business-environment/digital-transformation-and-e-commerce

c. Indicators used to measure the impact of ICT in the achievement of the SDGs in your organization's area of work

ITC tracks the implications of digital and its impact related to the following SDGs in particular

Contribute to 8.2   GOAL 8: Decent work and economic growth - TARGET 8.2: Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation

Contribute to 4.4.   GOAL 4: Quality education - TARGET 4.4: Ensure youth and adults have relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

Contribute to 9.3.   GOAL 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure - TARGET 9.3: Increase access of SMEs to financial services and integration into value chains and markets.

Contribute to 10.2.   GOAL 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries - TARGET 10.2: Empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, economic or other status

Contribute to 17.11.   GOAL 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development - TARGET 17.11: Support significantly increased exports of developing countries, doubling the LDCs' share of global exports by 2020

ITC specific indicators include

- Number of jobs created or maintained
- Number of clients gaining greater awareness of international trade from using ITC's business, trade and market intelligence

- Number of MSMEs having transacted international business, including national business transactions that are part of international or global value chains, as a result of ITC support
- Number of MSMEs led by women having transacted international business, including national business transactions that are part of international or global value chains, as a result of ITC support
- Number of MSMEs that have accessed new markets (including through e-commerce) as a result of ITC support

d. What assessment has your organization made of its engagement in WSIS-related work and digital development in its areas of responsibility?

III. What does your organization see as the main achievements, problems and emerging issues arising from WSIS and from digital development in its areas of responsibility since the Summit, particularly since 2015?

a. What have been the main achievements of WSIS and digital development?

b. What problems, obstacles and constraints have been encountered?

c. What new opportunities and challenges have emerged over the years since WSIS which need to be addressed?

Supporting tech entrepreneurs and the development of tech in developing and least developed countries

The African continent has emerged as a high-potential hub for tech innovation, driven by a rapid increase in internet access, youthful demographics, and a surge in entrepreneurialism, which has led to the increase in international venture capital flows, albeit still at a modest level (less than 1% of global flows). Over the past decade, African tech ecosystems have grown remarkably, in particular South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt. The continent is home to over a thousand tech hubs and a rising number of tech unicorns, in particular in verticals such as e-commerce (Jumia) and fintech (Flutterwave). This growth reflects Africa's participation in the global digital economy and the creative potential of its young, tech-savvy population. Challenges such as limited connectivity and infrastructure remain, but African entrepreneurs are responding with agile solutions, designing products and services uniquely tailored to local contexts.

The UN International Trade Centre (ITC) has played a key role in supporting Africa's tech rise. Through its #FastTrackTech initiative, launched in 2019, ITC has been empowering tech startups and digital freelancers to harness local and international opportunities. FastTrackTech is a specialized programme that has trained hundreds of tech startups and over 3,000 digital freelancers, prioritizing women and

youth. It supports tech entrepreneurs with skills development, mentorship, and market access, helping them grow their businesses and succeed in the global marketplace, while creating decent jobs and generating revenues in the services industry, but also in agriculture, with a focus on agritech, as in the case of ITC's Netherlands Trust Fund (NTF) V programme.

Supporting institutions and enterprises to master ecommerce

Over the past decade, digital trade and e-commerce in particular has experienced exponential growth, driven by advancements in technology, increased internet penetration, and the rise of mobile platforms. For developing and least-developed countries, this shift has opened new avenues for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to access global markets, bypassing traditional trade barriers. Initiatives like mobile banking, digital payment systems, and online marketplaces have enabled businesses in these regions to engage in cross-border trade more effectively. However, challenges such as limited digital infrastructure, high connectivity costs, and the digital divide remain, making it crucial for policy and capacity-building efforts to ensure that the benefits of e-commerce are inclusive and accessible to all. Despite these challenges, e-commerce has become a key driver of economic growth, innovation, and job creation, particularly for underserved groups such as women and youth.

ITC has elaborated a support programme to ensure that institutions and enterprises have the requisite skills and access to services that support the adoption of ecommerce and digital trade. Built on a decades long legacy of providing information and tools to small businesses the programme includes partnerships with leading international and local service providers of ecommerce platforms, logistics, payments and training. Regrouped under the moniker "ecomConnect" since 2019, support has been offered in over 50 countries on all continents, over 2,000 MSME have received coaching, and a further 7,500 regularly meet online to exchange learning.

Trade and market intelligence

- In terms of the trade and market access statistics that underpin ITC's market analysis tools, the last 10 to 15 years have seen the application of digital/IT solutions that have made the process of collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating data much more efficient, which in turn has increased the global coverage of data and allowed us to reach more users.
- In terms of scope, eCommerce has become an important dimension for users, particularly for firms, and has been increasingly integrated into ITC market analysis tools which include information on de minimis value, eMarket places and ePayment solutions.
- User growth has accelerated. In 2012, there were 3 market analysis tools, with about 200,000 registered users. By 2024, ITC was offering 6 market analysis tools, which have 1.36 million registered users, 87% of which are based in developing countries. When we include non-registered users, the numbers indicate that there are now 2.5 million users per year. Between Q3 2020 and Q3 2023, the number of users increased by 24.5% and the number of visits by 44%, some of this increase explained by the shift to online habits during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The growing number of users and visits demonstrates that the tools are increasingly considered as an important source for trade-related information. Results from the annual user survey confirm this and indicate that the tools help:
    - Generate an estimated $1.7 billion in trade transactions

- 92% of users to improve their operational efficiency by reducing the time or cost of obtaining trade-related information
- 95% of enterprises to take trade and investment decisions.
- 89% of policymakers make better-informed trade policy decisions.
- 92% of BSOs to better serve their clients' needs.

- ITC market analysis tools also contribute to initiatives and solutions led by regional institutions such as the African Union Commission (e.g. the African Trade Observatory), ECOWAS (the West African Competitiveness Observatory), and Islamic Centre for Development of Trade (OIC Trade Helpdesk). The tools also underly the platform provided through the EU funded Eastern Area Partnership Trade Helpdesk and the online helpdesk developed within "Euromed: Providing trade and market intelligence for better informed decisions" as well as the collaboration of international organisations that has led to the development of the Global Trade Helpdesk.

Online learning

- Over the past decade, ITC's e-learning offerings have significantly expanded in reach and accessibility, allowing learners worldwide to access quality education anytime and anywhere, supported by advancements in technology, methodology, and a broader course catalog. Offline access to training is now available, even in low-literacy contexts, thanks to adaptable technologies. ITC's user base has grown tenfold, reaching 100,000 participants annually with a catalogue of 115 courses. The e-learning approach has also become more learner-centric, featuring platforms tailored to diverse themes and geographies, supported by a scalable training methodology that boosts engagement and retention. This methodology encourages collaboration with local trainers, which enables the localization of training content and helps retain knowledge and build training capacity within beneficiary countries. Social learning features foster collaboration and community-building among learners, while face-to-face workshops have benefited from learning technologies, enhancing interactivity and multimedia use. E-learning is now embedded across ITC, enriching access to training both before and after face-to-face interactions, contributing to a more mature and accessible learning environment. Finally, the focus on mobile compatibility, microlearning, and the progressive integration of artificial intelligence underlines the evolving role of online learning in meeting modern educational and professional demands.

IV. Lessons learned in the implementation of the Summit outcomes in your organisation's specific areas of responsibility

The SME Competitiveness Outlook (SMECO) is the International Trade Centre's (ITC) flagship report, first published in 2015. Each edition delves into specific aspects of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) competitiveness, offering data analysis, academic insights, expert opinions, and case studies to guide policymakers, business leaders, and trade and investment support institutions. The 2025 edition of the SME Competitiveness Outlook (SMECO), explores the potential of digitalization to economically transform small business and the countries in which they operate. The report offers evidence-based

recommendations to support SMEs' digital transition at the firm, business ecosystem, and national levels, aiming to foster productivity, inclusivity, and resilience in the digital era.

- **Digital technologies benefit nearly all companies**. Over 80% of companies that make use of digital technologies report to have increased sales and reduced costs, a new ITC survey with over 7,000 companies in 78 countries shows.

- **Those that use technologies more extensively benefit the most.** Firms that intensively use digital technologies, which ITC dubbed expert users, were almost five times more likely to report a boost in sales by more than 50% than those with less extensive use, the emerging users. Similarly, 12% of expert users reported reduced costs by over 50%, compared to 1% of emerging users.

- **The advantages of adopting digital technology go beyond productivity gains.** On the one hand, emerging users reported mostly only operational gains, such as improved efficiency and timeliness of production and delivery, as well as communication-related improvements, such as access to new customers. On the other, three out of four expert users reported that digital technology helped *transform their businesses*, in addition to improving operations and communications. They have more opportunities for innovation and improved the quality of their products and services, which often translate into higher prices.

- **The higher the country's digital readiness, the higher the average firm's level of digital adoption**. Strikingly, in countries that are less digitally ready, the share of firms that report not using the internet for business operations is as high as 20%, twice as many as in digitally ready counties. In countries with low digital readiness, nearly half of firms (44%) are emerging digital users, at the low end of the scale. In countries with high digital readiness, most firms (59%) are expert users.

- **Preparing a country for digital transformation** is therefore fundamental for fostering the uptake of digital technologies by firms. To leverage digital transformation as a catalyst for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, countries must prioritize digital readiness. This requires investing in digital **infrastructure** and tackling the digital divide to ensure equitable internet access, together with promoting **skills** development within a supportive **regulatory framework**. These efforts are key to fully harnessing the benefits of digital transformation for all.

Lessons learned for specific communities with disadvantaged access to digital

Youth

- Over the past decade, ITC has made significant strides in empowering youth, particularly through digital solutions and entrepreneurship. The establishment of a Youth and Trade Programme marked a major milestone, demonstrating ITC's commitment to helping young people succeed in today's digital-first economy. A key initiative within this framework is the Ye! Community, a dynamic global network that connects young entrepreneurs with essential resources, mentorship, and peer support. Through both virtual and in-person events, the Ye! Community helps youth build digital skills in areas such as digital marketing and social media management. It also provides targeted support for tech and tech-enabled businesses to refine and grow. In collaboration with technical and vocational training providers, ITC further supports youth in acquiring job-ready digital skills aligned with market needs, including training in web development, cybersecurity, and

app development. This dual approach—promoting youth entrepreneurship on one track and employability on another—ensures that young people are not only creating new businesses but are also well-prepared to strengthen and expand established enterprises in the digital economy.

Women

- In the context of ITC SheTrades Initiative, ITC has intensified its work to close the digital gender gap. ITC SheTrades has scaled up its capacity building on digital trade in three ways: 1) directly through country projects, delivering trainings, coaching and mentoring services on digital trade to women-led businesses, 2) through partners such as UPS and Maersk, co-delivering skills development programmes on topics ranging from e-commerce, to digital marketing, to AI and logistics and e-payments, to women-led businesses, especially young women and developing targeted services for women such as discounted prices for partners' service packages, 3) through business support organisations, in particular building the capacity of a network of 19 SheTrades Hubs hosted by trade promotion organisations, SME development agencies, regional and national banks, and chambers of commerce, to improve digitalisation services to women-led businesses. This multiple approach enabled ITC to make its interventions scalable and sustainable. In 2024, ITC elevated its ambition with the establishment of the WTO-ITC Women Exporters in the Digital Economy (WEIDE) Fund. The WEIDE Fund offers early stage women entrepreneurs and export-ready women entrepreneurs with grants and bespoke skills development to accelerate their participation in digital trade.

Refugees

- Over the past decade, the International Trade Centre (ITC) has launched a dedicated approach to supporting refugees by integrating digital skills training and online economic opportunities into its programming, particularly in Kenya and Pakistan. This shift marks a strategic pivot toward empowering refugees to thrive in the digital economy. Based on the initial Refugee Employment and Skills Initiative (RESI), launched in the last ten years, ITC has helped refugees in Kenya's Kakuma and Dadaab camps gain skills in high-demand areas like e-commerce, data management, translation and digital marketing. These programs were designed to connect participants with global online job platforms, offering remote work opportunities that bypass traditional employment barriers faced by refugees. In Pakistan, ITC has also rolled out new digital training programs over the past decade, equipping refugees with skills aligned with the fast-evolving digital economy. Collaborating with local vocational training centers, ITC introduced courses in web development, graphic design, and coding, allowing refugees to integrate into Pakistan's digital workforce or pursue freelance work. ITC's focus on partnerships with online freelancing platforms has further amplified these efforts, enabling refugees to access global markets, earn sustainable incomes, and contribute economically despite restrictions linked to their refugee status.

V. Observations or recommendations concerning the future of WSIS and digital development, taking into account the outcomes of the Summit of the Future in September 2024

In light of the *Summit of the Future* outcomes, ITC sees several strategic directions for WSIS and digital development. ITC recommends prioritizing targeted support to developing countries, especially least developed, landlocked, and small island states, to close digital divides. This includes boosting digital infrastructure, reducing connectivity costs, and expanding digital literacy to ensure inclusive participation in digital trade. We also believe that MSMEs, as the motor of economic development – jobs and inclusion in local economies – deserve a particular focus.

ITC also emphasizes the need for policies that enhance digital market access for MSMEs, making digital environments open, fair, and supportive of small enterprises. Initiatives like ITC's *Digital Moonshot* can serve as models for enabling MSME digitalization at scale, providing training, resources, and connectivity to empower small businesses.

Further, ITC supports greater investment in digital public goods and infrastructure, including data-sharing frameworks, to advance trade data transparency and interoperability. Building on initiatives such as the "African Trade Observatory," ITC is committed to fostering regional data cooperation, supporting the secure and equitable sharing of trade data. Additionally, ITC underscores the importance of digital skills development for women, youth, and vulnerable groups, leveraging programs such as "SheTrades" and the Women Exporters in the Digital Economy (WEIDE) Fund, launched by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Trade Centre (ITC) in February 2024, and the "Refugee Employment and Skills Initiative" to enhance equitable digital participation.

VI. Please identify publications, reports and other documents by your organisation which you consider can contribute to the work of the review.

Making Digital Connectivity Work for MSMEs (Sep 2023): https://www.broadbandcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Making-Digital-Connectivity-Work-for-MSMEs-Broadband-Commission-WG.pdf

SME Competitiveness Outlook 2022: Connected Services, Competitive Businesses (Sep 2022): https://www.intracen.org/resources/publications/sme-competitiveness-outlook-2022-connected-services-competitive-businesses

African Market Trends in Technology Services: 11 country profiles (Feb 2024): https://www.intracen.org/resources/publications/african-market-trends-in-technology-services-second-edition