

E-commerce and Digital Economy Programme

Year in Review 2023

Summary



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Geneva, 2024

Message from Shamika N. Sirimanne, Director, Division on Technology and Logistics



In 2023, the world passed the halfway point on the road to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. While progress has stalled, and even regressed on several SDGs and development indicators, there *are* tools that the

international community can and should use to turn the tide and deliver on the commitments of Agenda 2030. Digitalization is one such tool that has the potential to alter the current course of development, if well managed.

Recognition of the transformative power of digital technologies has been growing, not least in the economic development context, with far-reaching implications for private sector development, trade, and investment.

While much has been done in recent years to foster the development of an inclusive global digital economy, lots of work lies ahead. Digital divides are far from closed, and although the gap in the number of people having access to the internet worldwide narrowed by almost one billion between 2019 and 2022, for people and businesses in many developing countries benefits of the data-driven digital economy and trade landscape remain hard to capture. It remains the fact that most of the value creation and capture in the digital economy is concentrated in a small number of very large economies.

An innovative and sound approach to digital and data governance for development, further capacity building on various aspects of e-commerce and digital trade, sustained multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation remain essential to reaping inclusive and sustainable development gains from the fast-evolving digital economy. Targeted efforts to ensure the effective empowerment of women and other population groups at increased risk of being left further behind are particularly needed.

I am proud to present in this Year in Review the results that the ECDE Programme achieved to this end in 2023. I would like to convey my gratitude to all our partners, donors, and beneficiaries for their trust in our work which seeks to support developing countries' efforts to establish favorable conditions for people and businesses to benefit from digitalization.

I look forward to continued collaboration in 2024 and beyond as the United Nations presses on in exploring how best to boost digital cooperation, including through a Global Digital Compact and by leveraging the processes established at the World Summit on the Information Society. Discussions on how to chart the course will need to be multilateral and multistakeholder in nature, to ensure that future digital transformations benefit the many rather than the few.

Message from Torbjörn Fredriksson, Head, E-commerce and Digital Economy Branch



2023 signified the end of the first five-year work plan of the ECDE Programme.

Since 2019, much has happened globally around e-commerce and the digital economy. The COVID-19 pandemic was critical in raising awareness of the

importance of being able to harness digital opportunities for development and resilience. The role of digital platforms and data flows was further accentuated by increased reliance on big data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence.

At the same time, many of the challenges we observed five years ago remain to be addressed. Digital divides have continued to widen. Market power in the digital economy has become even more concentrated, pointing to the need for policy responses at both national and international levels. It is therefore not surprising that political attention to the development implications of digitalization has also surged, including with the ongoing efforts to agree on a Global Digital Compact.

The overall trends reconfirm the relevance of the ECDE Programme. Our research during the past five years has put the spotlight on value creation and capture in the digital economy, the role of digital platforms and the need for better governance of data. The Programme has enabled better measurement of e-commerce and digital trade. In terms of technical assistance, more than 35 eTrade Readiness Assessments have been completed. Developing countries are also turning to us for preparing e-commerce strategies and action plans

to speed up the implementation of recommendations that have emerged through the assessments. The eTrade for Women initiative now involves some 300 women digital entrepreneurs from all developing regions. We have supported the building of consensus in difficult areas, such as how to make data work for sustainable development, and last year ended on a high with the UNCTAD eWeek 2023. I am happy to note that almost all targets set for the first five years were achieved or exceeded.

The ECDE Programme is greatly enabled by the commitment of its core donors: Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and, since late 2023, Australia. Their multi-year support to the Programme has allowed us to secure talented staff and competent consultants. Our work in specific areas has also benefited from support from several other funding partners highlighted in this Year in Review.

The task is far from finished. In the next four-year period, the ECDE Programme will continue to work with member States and partners to foster more sustainable development. Special attention will among other things be given to the interface between digitalization and environmental sustainability, to ensuring sustained support for the implementation of policy reform in the area of eTrade Readiness, and to the role of regional integration and collaboration.

I would like to close my message by expressing my sincere appreciation to the entire ECDE team and other UNCTAD colleagues, to our consultants, donors and partners, for making it possible for us to deliver. And finally, to our member States for putting your trust in our work.

Summary

In 2023 a sluggish recovery from the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and growing geo-economic fragmentation set the scene for new technological disruptions such as the market entry of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and the ensuing race for market dominance. The growing use of digital technologies continued to impact, change, and reshape businesses in all sectors.

A narrowing gap in digital connectivity worldwide was welcome news in light of the previously reported halt in progress towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nevertheless, persisting disparities in countries' readiness to engage in and benefit from the fast-evolving data-driven digital

economy underscored the unabated need for support to developing countries and especially the least developed countries (LDCs) in this area.

Through the E-Commerce and Digital Economy (ECDE) Programme, UNCTAD worked with developing countries and the international community to equip policymakers and empower women digital entrepreneurs with the knowledge, capacities, and dialogue avenues they need to shape an inclusive e-commerce and digital economy ecosystem that works for sustainable development. The main results of this work in 2023 – the last year of the Programme's first five-year workplan – are outlined below.

Enhancing understanding

UNCTAD's [Digital Economy Report \(DER\) 2021](#) continued to enrich the debate on data governance for development. Its analysis was reflected in a number of key outcomes, including a Statement on behalf of the Group of 77 and China by the delegation of the Republic of Cuba at the informal consultations on the Global Digital Compact, the report of the High-Level Advisory Board (HLAB) on Effective Multilateralism on digital and data governance, and an expert report delivered to the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council among others. The DER 2021 also informed the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on information and communications technologies (ICT) for sustainable development.¹ By the end of 2023, the DER 2021 had been downloaded more than 165,000 times.

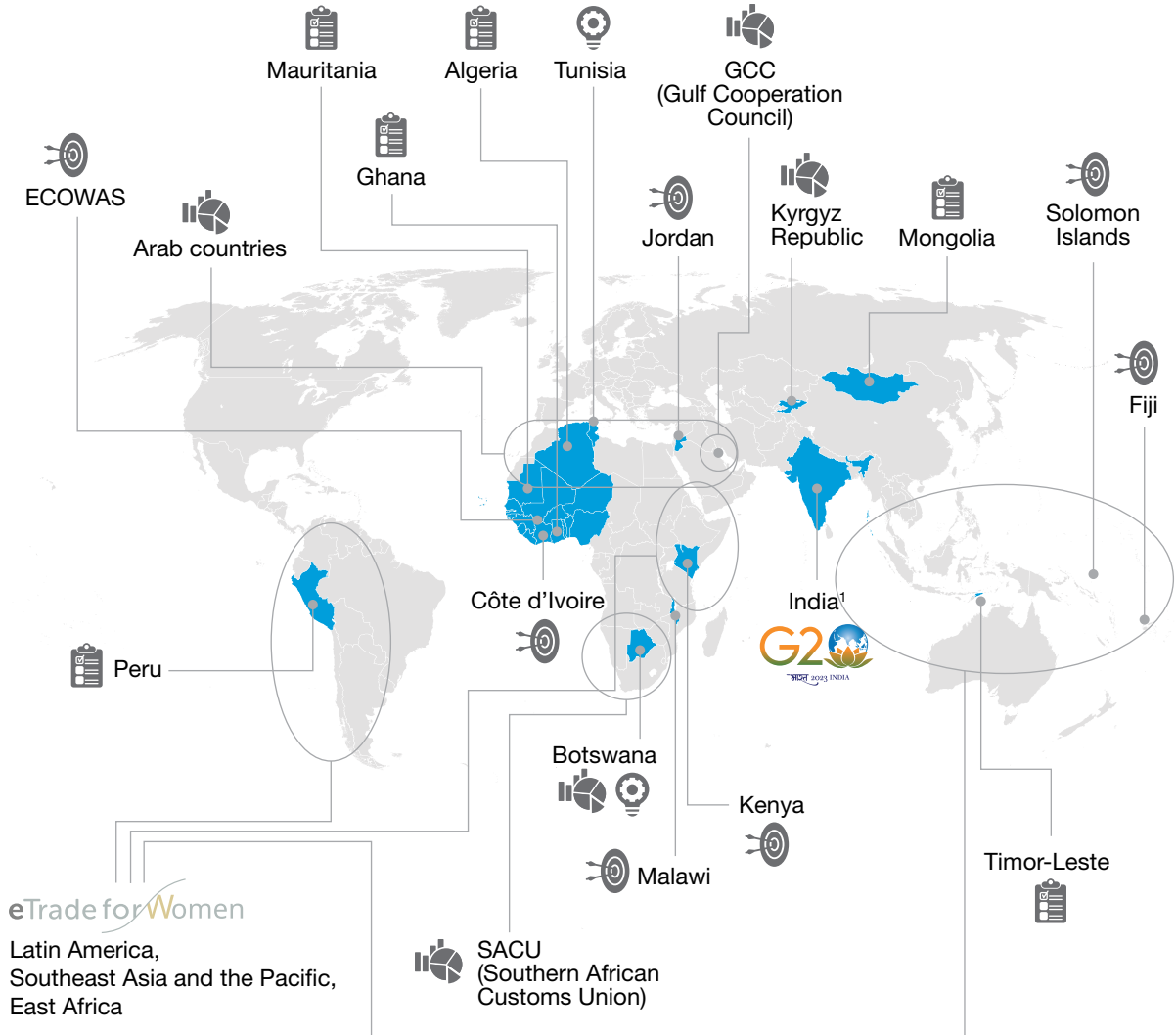
New research and analysis publications explored [G20 Members' Regulations of Cross-Border Data Flows](#) and approaches to [Measuring the value of e-commerce](#), while the 2nd edition of the [Handbook](#)

[on Measuring Digital Trade](#) (IMF-OECD-UNCTAD-WTO) laid a foundation for technical assistance and statistical capacity-building in the area of measuring digital trade. A joint report on [Digital Trade for Development](#) (IMF-OECD-UNCTAD-World Bank-WTO) explored opportunities and challenges for developing economies arising from digital trade, highlighting the role of international cooperation in that regard.

UNCTAD's Cyberlaw Tracker was updated to reflect global legislative changes across the four areas of e-transaction, data protection and privacy, cybercrime, and online consumer protection. Indirect taxation was added to the areas being tracked. A new online collection system was launched to optimize the process of collection of core indicators on ICT usage by businesses. UNCTAD also launched an improved database on trade in digitally deliverable services, while improvements to the underlying source data coming from customs declarations enabled the improvement of UNCTAD's statistics on ICT goods trade.

¹ A/RES/78/132.

MAP 1: Where we worked in 2023

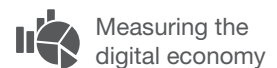
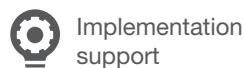


The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

¹ in close collaboration with the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology

Includes capacity-building activities on measurement jointly organized with the IMF, OECD, World Bank and WTO, as well as partners from the United Nations Statistics Division, UNESCWA, and the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics.

Legend:



Source: UNCTAD 2024.

Strengthening capacities

UNCTAD continued its engagement with developing countries to strengthen their e-commerce enabling environment through eT Readiness Assessments (eT Readies) and the development of E-commerce Strategies. Four eT Readies were completed in 2023 – for [Ghana](#), Mauritania, [Mongolia](#), and [Peru](#) – bringing the total number to 36. Work on new eT Readies commenced in Algeria, Timor-Leste, Trinidad and Tobago and Zimbabwe.

In April, Jordan's National E-commerce Strategy was officially endorsed by the Council of Ministers and acknowledged as a powerful instrument for e-commerce expansion. The first regional E-commerce Strategy in West Africa – that of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – was endorsed by the ECOWAS Council of Ministers in July, and the national E-commerce Strategy of Kenya was launched in December, to fortify the country's position as a digital frontrunner in Africa. Delivered under the Pacific Digital Economy Programme (PDEP), Solomon Islands' first [National E-commerce Strategy 2022-2027](#) was formally approved by the Cabinet. The development of national E-Commerce Strategies building on existing eT Readies got underway in Fiji and Côte d'Ivoire.

The [3rd eT Ready implementation review](#) confirmed previous trends and uncovered novel insights regarding the implementation processes of e-commerce policy actions and the role of the eT Readies, while also singling out the urgent need to bolster the capabilities of nascent governance arrangements to fast-track implementation. So far 25 countries have reported implementation progress.

To further strengthen implementation, UNCTAD developed a new eTrade Reform Tracker, whose functionalities enable the assignment of responsibilities, tracking of task execution, and reporting on the progress of time-bound deliverables. A live demonstration of its main features took place during the UNCTAD eWeek 2023. Feedback from the 26 participants (of whom 8 women) from 24 countries will be instrumental for fine-tuning UNCTAD's rollout strategy in 2024.

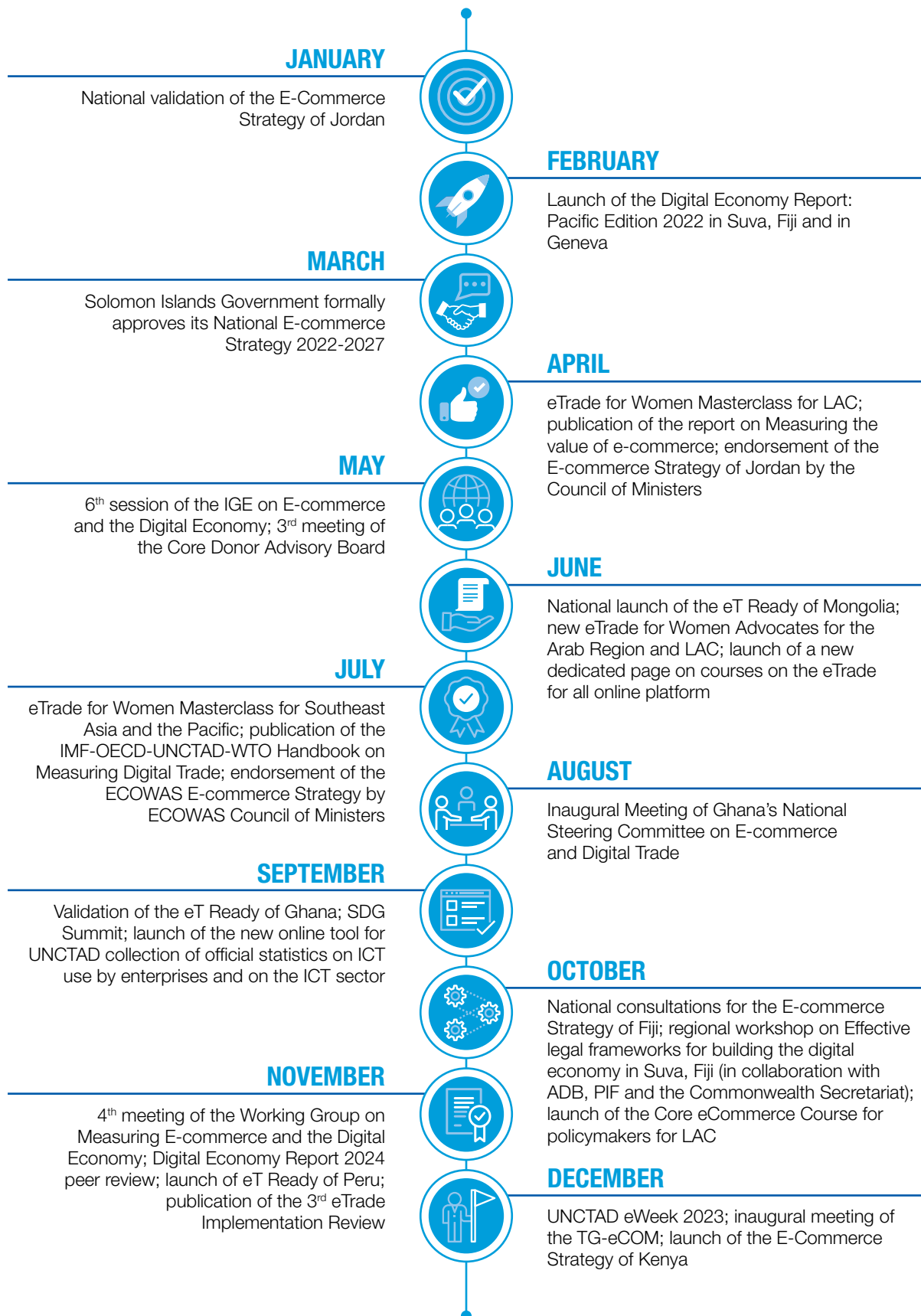
In the area of e-commerce and law reform, UNCTAD delivered two capacity-building courses - on digital identity for trade and development, and on the legal aspects of e-commerce respectively – to Pacific SIDS in the frame of PDEP.

UNCTAD worked closely with the IMF, OECD, World Bank and WTO, as well as partners from the United Nations Statistics Division, UNESCWA, and the Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics, to deliver training and capacity building to help improve the availability of timely, robust, and comparable official statistics on the digital economy and digital trade.

More than 800 people (half of whom identified as women) from across the public and private sectors, civil society, and academia in 85 countries benefited from capacity-building activities across the areas of eTrade readiness, law reform and measurement (see Map 1). Throughout all technical cooperation and capacity-building activities, the ECDE Programme sought to collaborate with other parts of UNCTAD and effectively leverage partnerships with *eTrade for all* and other developing partners.²

² Intra-institutional collaboration took place with TrainForTrade, the Statistics Service, and colleagues working on the topics of trade facilitation and logistics, competition and consumer protection in particular.

ECDE Programme highlights in 2023



Empowering women digital entrepreneurs

More than 60 women digital entrepreneurs from 16 developing countries across Latin America and Southeast Asia and the Pacific benefited from empowerment and community-building activities delivered by the eTrade for Women initiative in partnership with the Advocates for the respective regions. Several *eTrade for all* partners also contributed, including the World Intellectual Property Organization and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA). Key developments in the eTrade for Women regional Communities included the strategic selection of 15 Community Leaders – more advanced members who played a crucial role in supporting organizational activities and strengthening the network. Their contribution to shaping more inclusive policies continued to be recognized – for instance, Ms. Betty Bâ, leader of the Francophone Africa Community, was appointed by the Government of Senegal as National advisor on digital inclusion and communication.

eTrade for Women contributed to 28 advocacy actions in 2023, to share insights into the challenges that women digital entrepreneurs in developing countries are faced with and raise awareness of the need for more and better targeted support. The four Advocates representing Francophone Africa,

English-speaking Africa, the Arab region and Southeast Asia, 14 Community Leaders, and one community member from the Pacific were also present at the UNCTAD eWeek 2023, where they took full advantage of the learning, advocacy and networking opportunities available throughout the event.

Since the launch of the eTrade for Women initiative in 2019, UNCTAD has delivered Masterclasses to more than 300 women from 40 countries and created five regional Communities that facilitate business, technical advice, and networking opportunities for their members. In 2023, an entrepreneur from Nigeria – Ms. Imade Osuobeni - turned these opportunities into a prospering agri-food e-commerce business that in turn has impacted more than 4,000 rural women and youth through digital and financial literacy training, the distribution of more than 400 mobile phones and the disbursement of more than 3 million Nigerian naira (over US\$ 3,000) in 70 small business loans with 100 per cent loan repayment rate. The impact has been remarkable – 57 per cent average increase in income for rural female farmers and traders, 86 new bank accounts opened and an increase in savings among the women with bank accounts.

Building consensus

The 6th session of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts (IGE) on E-commerce and the Digital Economy delivered as a main outcome a set of agreed policy recommendations on how to make data work for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A new Task Group on Measuring E-commerce Value (TG-eCOM) commenced work under the Working Group on Measuring E-commerce and the Digital Economy, with the aim to develop internationally agreed guidelines and recommendations on measuring the value of e-commerce transactions and support the development of internationally comparable statistics on e-commerce value.

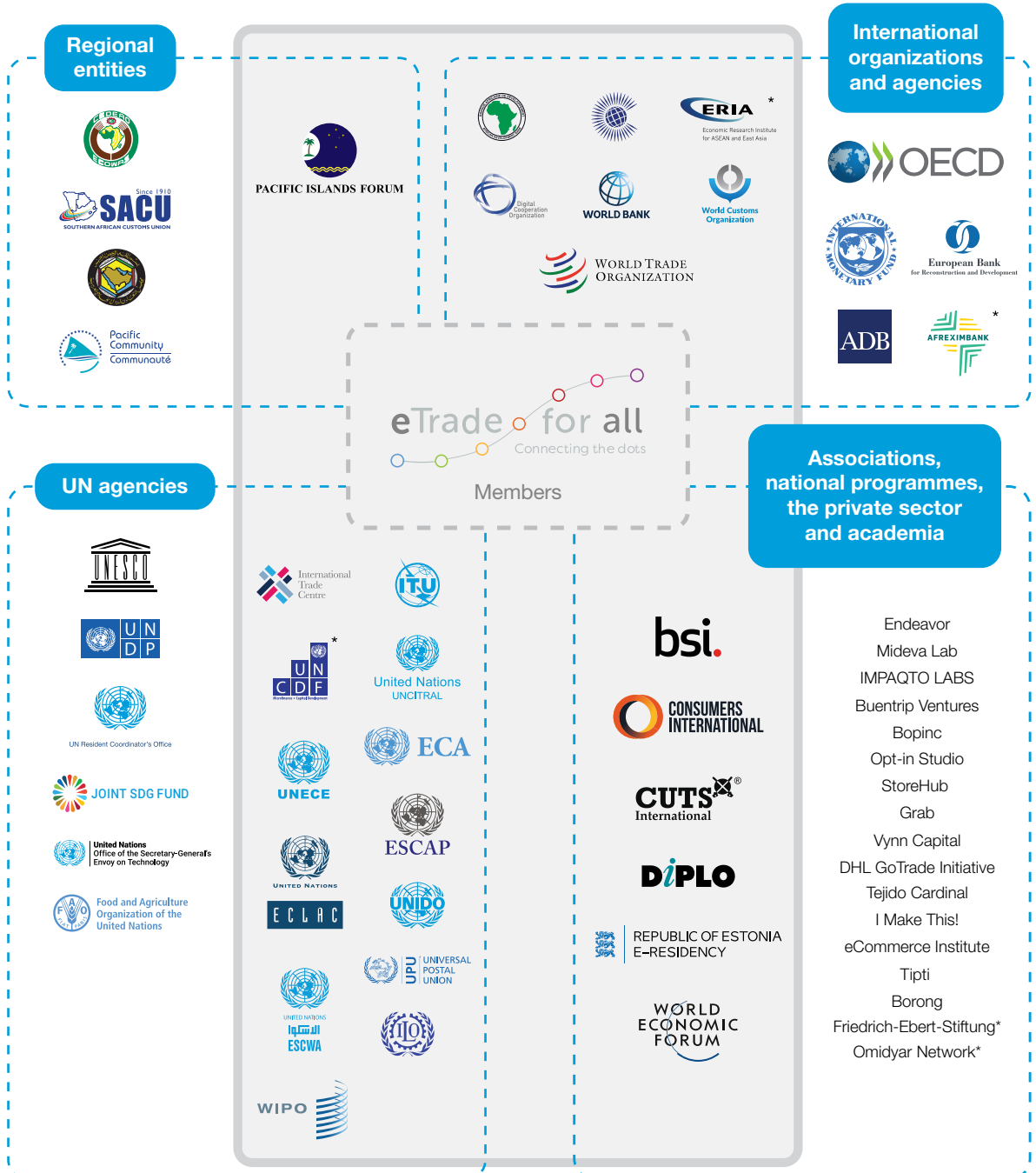
In the G20 Development Working Group, UNCTAD provided support to India's G20 Presidency in developing the G20 Principles on Harnessing Data for Development (D4D). The Principles were adopted at the G20 Development Ministers' Meeting in June and endorsed in the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, which also reaffirmed the role of data for development and recognized the importance of data free flow with trust and cross-border data flows.

ECDE Partners in 2023

Funding partners



giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



*also a funding partner

Fostering collaboration

Partners in the UNCTAD-led *eTrade for all* initiative continued to support and contribute to various technical cooperation and capacity-building efforts. UNCTAD, UNECLAC and selected *eTrade for all* partners launched a new distance learning Core E-commerce Course for policymakers from Latin America and the Caribbean, to bridge knowledge gaps in how to improve the environment for inclusive e-commerce development. Twenty-eight of the initiative's 35 partners actively contributed to the UNCTAD eWeek 2023.

The 2023 edition of the UNCTAD eWeek, which addressed the theme “Shaping the Future of the Digital Economy”, took place in Geneva and online in December. The event gathered more than 3,500 registered participants from 159 countries across all developing regions and country groups. It was the most widely attended and inclusive eWeek thus far, reinforcing its position as the leading global forum to discuss the development opportunities and challenges associated with the digital economy. Featuring over

150 sessions, the eWeek brought together government leaders, CEOs, heads of international organizations, civil society representatives and other key stakeholders to address critical issues such as governing digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI), promoting eco-friendly digital practices, empowering women in the digital economy and enhancing developing countries' digital readiness. By outlining actions and steps needed to turn digital opportunities into shared and sustainable development gains, the eWeek outcome document, entitled “[The Geneva Vision on the Future of the Digital Economy](#)”, sent a strong message to the UN-convened Summit of the Future in September 2024.

UNCTAD collaborated with the Joint SDG Fund and other entities in the UN Development System on the incubation of a new investment window on Digital Transformation for development, to support joint programmes at the country level coordinated through UN Resident Coordinator Offices (UN RCOs).

Communications and outreach



12 new publications released



168,000 downloads

of Programme publications in 2023



Numerous mentions in **national** and **international** media



20 news items published on the **UNCTAD website**



More than **50,000 eTrade for all** visitors, **10** monthly newsletters



released to some **5,500 subscribers** as of December 2023 (up **55%** from 2022)

• For a total of over **17,000 views**



• *Story on the digital economy in the Pacific* was featured on **UN.org** – in multiple languages



UNCTAD eWeek 2023 garnered **significant global media attention**, with coverage spanning **295 articles** across **29 countries** and **8 languages**.

Following a successful UNCTAD eWeek, **6,600 people** now subscribe to the **eWeek mailing list**.



The dedicated webpage hosted by **UNCTAD.org** (in English, French and Spanish) recorded **more than 42,000 views**.



The Programme's X (formerly Twitter) handle, **@ECDEatUNCTAD**, continues to be the **4th largest account** in UNCTAD,



UNCTAD eWeek 2023 generated substantial engagement on social media platforms, with **700+ related posts on X** (formerly Twitter) and **LinkedIn** respectively (up from **450+** tweets in 2022).



boasting **8,000+** followers as of December 2023 – up **12%** from 2022, with a **60%** year on year increase in average impressions per post.

The ECDE Programme @ 5 (2019-2023)

OUR SUPPORT BENEFITED:

109

countries supported via technical cooperation or capacity-building activities³, including:

- **30 LDCs**
- **28 SIDS**
- **19 LLDCs**

2,000+

participants in **capacity-building** activities delivered in-person or online⁴, of whom at least **45% women**



300+

women digital entrepreneurs **empowered through eTrade for Women** interventions across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, the Arab Region, and the West Balkans

Close to

10,000

participants in the **UNCTAD eWeek** (formerly eCommerce Week)



OUR RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS YIELDED:

56

publications released, for more than **1.32 million downloads**

94

news items published on the UNCTAD website, for close to **750,000 unique views**

54

monthly *eTrade for all* **newsletters** were sent to some **5,500 subscribers** (as of December 2023)

100+

hours of intergovernmental deliberations on e-commerce and the digital economy for development

Numerous policy and academic citations in developed as well as in developing countries

OUR EFFORTS MOBILIZED:



Close to **US\$ 23 million** raised in extra-budgetary funding for supporting developing countries in e-commerce and the digital economy, from **20+ funding partners**



More than **30 staff** by the end of 2023, from a team of half a dozen when the Programme first started



Hundreds of consultants from both developed and developing countries, with a **good gender balance**



35 partners from **different sectors**, regions and areas of work with the collective vision of *eTrade for all*

³ Includes those that benefited from joint capacity-building activities in collaboration with various partners (e.g., UNCTAD's TrainforTrade, IMF, OECD, the World Bank, WTO, UNSD and UN regional commissions). Does not include most overseas territories.


⁴ Idem.



...ALL CONTRIBUTING TO:

- ➔ **Laying a foundation** for **data governance** for development
- ➔ **Intergovernmental consensus** on how to make **data** work for the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**
- ➔ **36** national or regional **eTrade Readiness Assessments**, with **25 countries** reporting **implementation progress** to date
- ➔ **Increase** in the adoption of **e-commerce strategies** and **action plans** by developing countries, beyond those directly supported by UNCTAD
- ➔ **Changing perceptions** about the role of **women** in the **digital economy**
- ➔ **Improved dialogue** between women digital entrepreneurs and policymakers in developing countries, to help shape a more inclusive policy and regulatory environment
- ➔ **Enhanced intergovernmental** and **multi-stakeholder collaboration**, and stronger partnerships in support of e-commerce and the digital economy for development

...AND INDIRECTLY TO:



Increase in the adoption of cyberlaw legislation worldwide and in developing countries in particular

Increase in the share of Aid-for-Trade commitments to the ICT sector (from **1.3%** in 2017 to **4.1%** in 2022)

Increase in the uptake of e-commerce (from **24%** of adults (aged 15+) worldwide in 2017 to **39%** in 2021)⁵

5 Based on World Bank Global Findex data.

Looking ahead to 2024 and beyond

The Digital Economy Report 2024, which is devoted to the topic of Environmentally sustainable digitalization, trade and development, will be launched in the spring. New technical notes will explore the rise of digital trade in international agreements as well as measuring the value of e-commerce and the role of platforms. As part of PDEP, a second edition of the Digital Economy Report for the Pacific as well as a regional comparative review of e-commerce legislation will be released.

The Programme's main goals and objectives in the capacity-building domain include new eT Readies (e.g., for Timor-Leste, Trinidad and Tobago and Zimbabwe) and E-commerce Strategies (e.g., for Côte d'Ivoire, Fiji, Timor-Leste and Mongolia), as well as sustained support for their implementation, including through the deployment of the newly developed eTrade Reform Tracker in several partner countries.

Three new Masterclasses (for Francophone Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean), the eTrade for Women Academy, and new training materials and technical assistance on measuring the digital economy will add to the Programme's capacity-building agenda. eTrade for Women will also expand its geographical reach to South Asia and appoint a first Advocate for the region.

Building on the 36 eT Readies conducted to date and their implementation, the 7th session of the IGE will explore the topic "Building digital readiness: From assessments to implementation". It will offer an opportunity to strengthen synergies between UNCTAD's consensus-building efforts, research and analysis, and technical cooperation, with a view to fostering increased political commitment for implementation of relevant policies and strategies at the national and regional levels.

The Programme will seek to further collaborate with its partners in joint programmes, including in the framework of the new Digital Transformation Window of the Joint SDG Fund. It will continue to work with the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology in the implementation of the Roadmap on Digital Cooperation and support the preparations for the UN Summit of the Future and a Global Digital Compact. Finally, it will contribute to the discussions on digital governance envisaged as part of the events on occasion of UNCTAD's 60th anniversary celebration – UNCTAD@60, in June 2024.

