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Declaration of the fifth meeting of the Youth Forum to the sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Shaping the future of trade and development

1. This declaration contains the priorities of youth who participated in the fifth meeting of the UNCTAD Youth Forum, held from 20 to 23 October 2025, as part of the sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XVI). With 293 participants from 61 countries, along with an additional 445 youth who engaged in two pre-UNCTAD XVI webinars, the fifth meeting of the Forum provided a global platform to discuss a just, inclusive and transformative future in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

2. Youth participants selected three main topics they deemed to be the most crucial to young people to address at this point in time, namely, building resilient, inclusive and sustainable economies; making technology and innovation work for development; and the future of work and education. In each of these areas, suggestions and policy recommendations were made, to be presented to member States at UNCTAD XVI.

I. Building resilient, inclusive and sustainable economies

3. As emphasized in the report of the Secretary-General to UNCTAD XVI, in a world facing overlapping crises, fragile supply chains and growing inequality, shaping the future requires structural transformation towards more resilient, inclusive and sustainable economies.¹ Resilience, inclusion and sustainability must go hand in hand, from strengthening local industries and regional trade to advancing on decent work and the green transition. Young people are important agents in driving this transformation. As future leaders, entrepreneurs, innovators and workers, they can reimagine and promote economic systems that create opportunities, while empowering people and protecting the planet.

Inclusive growth and local resilience

4. Inclusive growth and local resilience must go hand in hand. Economic transformation should lead to an increase in real opportunities for those most affected by inequality, climate

¹ See <https://unctad.org/publication/shaping-future-driving-economic-transformation-equitable-inclusive-and-sustainable>.



shocks and insecure work, while ensuring that local systems are strong enough to absorb and recover from disruptions.

5. Youth emphasize that inclusive growth requires international solidarity in the form of differentiated finance and debt relief, reflecting countries' varying capacities. Youth emphasize that fair access to financing and debt sustainability are essential in enabling developing countries to invest in a resilient, inclusive and sustainable economic transformation. External debt restricts investment in young people, forcing austerity measures that undermine education, innovation and employment. Equitable financing tools, such as those advanced in the Sevilla Commitment, should be widely implemented, to ensure a just global financial system. Without financial justice, the future of young generations remains at risk. Youth support UNCTAD leadership in developing an inclusive financial architecture and call for strengthened efforts in this direction.

6. Youth entrepreneurship remains a powerful approach to fostering resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth. Fostering youth entrepreneurship in developing countries requires an enabling and holistic ecosystem, which encompasses equitable access to quality education, finance and networks; efficient logistics and transportation infrastructure; and a skilled and available labour force. Among these factors, access to finance remains the most critical enabler. Targeted reforms, simplified registration, microcredits and lower interest rates for first-time founders or underserved groups (including youth and women) can turn into catalysts for opportunities.

7. Young women remain disproportionately excluded from entrepreneurship, facing barriers related to perception, safety and finance. Addressing these requires intersectional policy design, including with regard to access to finance, scholarships, childcare support and awareness campaigns that normalize women's leadership. Persons with disabilities, rural youth and migrants must likewise be included through accessible design and participatory frameworks.

8. Furthermore, a promising development frontier lies in youth-led social enterprises. Youth urge member States to further sensitize enabling frameworks, to prioritize such enterprises for their socioeconomic benefits. Such initiatives merge innovation with inclusion, addressing environmental and community needs while creating employment. Public recognition; accessible financing and integration into national small and medium-sized enterprises; and social economy frameworks are vital in order to unlock their potential.

Climate-resilient development

9. Youth highlight that the climate crisis is one of the most pressing issues and stress that addressing it requires putting climate justice at the heart of any green and inclusive economic transformation. Therefore, youth call for the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement, particularly with regard to the injustices that the climate crisis presents to developing countries.

10. Youth and vulnerable communities, particularly in developing countries, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, while having limited influence on related decision-making processes. The transition towards sustainability must therefore ensure that those most affected are also empowered to help shape solutions.

11. Youth call for the removal of persistent barriers to youth climate action, including restricted roles in policy development, insufficient financing for youth-led projects and limited access to advocacy at the national and international levels. Based on all the identified key barriers to inclusive and sustainable growth, youth advocate for the following: strengthening regional value chains; investing in decentralized green infrastructure, such as community renewables and climate-smart agriculture; promoting community finance and cooperatives; and providing structured support for youth-led innovations.

12. Youth further express interest in exploring concepts such as circular economies and doughnut economics, to ensure that economic activity supports human and ecological well-being and the re-centring of people and the planet. Youth support the efforts of Beyond Lab on "youth moving beyond gross domestic product", which incorporates various indicators

that bring human and planetary well-being back into focus.² Further, youth support the idea that climate-resilient economies are embedded in a social and cultural context, recognizing that there is no single system or pathway that can work universally.

13. Youth recognize both the transformative opportunities and emerging challenges presented by artificial intelligence. The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence requires substantial energy and resource consumption, which may undermine global climate objectives if not responsibly managed. Youth therefore call for the development of green and sustainable artificial intelligence infrastructure, including the use of renewable energy, efficient data centres and circular technology practices, to ensure that technological progress contributes to, rather than compromises, climate resilience and environmental sustainability.

New cooperation mechanisms

14. Youth identify the need to strengthen local communities, which is particularly important in times of economic or environmental shock. Such communities are closely connected to the needs of their populations and can offer services that promote economic and social inclusion. Strong, well-connected communities also play a vital role in supporting the mental well-being of youth by providing social networks and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

15. Regional cooperation is also considered of importance since it can strengthen the independence and competitiveness of regions through, among others, greater collective bargaining power. Youth see the need for the independence of unconditional free trade and trade restrictions in times of conflict.

16. The inclusion of women in economic activity, as well as negotiations and policy design, is key in cooperation mechanisms. Gender-specific solutions should be included, to ensure the fair inclusion of women and counteract gender-specific inequalities. Further, vulnerable groups, such as Indigenous youth, youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and LGBTQ+ youth, should be included in decision-making processes.

17. For global cooperation, youth call for fair and equitable co-creating processes, as well as the sharing of sustainable technologies, resources and best practices. Moreover, youth stress that global inequalities must be acknowledged, to ensure that international cooperation is responsive to different realities. Such inequalities are reflected in the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on different countries, with certain local environments and economies hit harder than others.

18. Youth call for international cooperation, to ensure a just transition to an economy operating within planetary boundaries, with active participation from regions that may be less affected by climate change. Additionally, cross-generational cooperation is crucial in tackling the challenges of transitioning to resilient, inclusive and sustainable economies. Youth ask not only to be included in the discussion but to co-create discussion spaces. In cooperating across generations, innovation, creativity, experience, institutional memory and legitimacy can be connected, to design policies that are based on the lived experiences of young people.

II. Making technology and innovation work for development

19. Technological innovation is transforming global development. Artificial intelligence and other frontier technologies have the potential to accelerate progress towards sustainable growth. However, this potential is not being realized equally everywhere. Structural barriers still prevent millions of young people from contributing to and benefiting from transformative innovation. Youth stress that access to technology, data and digital skills is deeply unequal, both within and between countries. To make technology a force for inclusion rather than division, youth call for deliberate action to empower them as innovators and creators; to ensure universal access to digital infrastructure and skills; and to include their voices in the governance of emerging technologies.

² See <https://www.thebeyondlab.org/initiative/beyond-gdp>.

Enabling ecosystems for youth innovation

20. Youth emphasize that innovation is not the privilege of a few but a collective capacity that can drive inclusion, sustainability and opportunity when the right conditions are in place. Across regions, young innovators are already using technology to address real-world challenges, from mapping flood risks to creating youth-led enterprises and developing inclusive education platforms. Youth call for stronger support systems that allow them to turn ideas into action and technology. Governments should foster an enabling environment in which young innovators operate. Doing so begins with education, where digital and entrepreneurial skills are integrated as core competencies across all levels.

21. Connectivity today is a precondition for opportunity. Public investment in broadband, open technologies and community innovation hubs should be viewed as social infrastructure, as essential as roads or schools. Therefore, youth call on member States to bridge the digital divide by investing in broadband and infrastructure, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. The expansion of public–private partnerships to provide connectivity and access to open-source tools is also encouraged. UNCTAD, in *Technology and Innovation Report 2025*, underlines that inclusive artificial intelligence depends on infrastructure, data and skills.³ Without these, digital inequality will widen, both within and between countries. Bridging this divide requires deliberate public action, global partnerships and affordable access strategies prioritizing underserved and low-income communities.

22. Youth underscore the urgent need to address the barriers faced by young entrepreneurs, particularly those in the informal economy, in securing intellectual property protections. With an estimated 96.8 per cent of young workers in developing countries operating informally, most young innovators remain excluded from formal intellectual property systems due to prohibitive costs, administrative complexities and limited legal and technical guidance. This gap weakens their ability to protect original ideas and limits their potential to scale inclusive, community-rooted innovation. To foster equitable access, youth call on member States to promote simplified, affordable and transparent intellectual property frameworks, including low-cost registration processes, targeted fee waivers and advisory services. Such efforts should be complemented by capacity-building programmes that strengthen knowledge among youth of intellectual property systems.

Youth participation and inclusive governance

23. Youth call for participation in innovation governance to be institutionalized. Legislation on emerging technologies, from data governance to artificial intelligence, largely excludes young voices. Yet the ethical and social questions surrounding automation and data use will define this generation's future. Mechanisms for youth co-creation in digital strategies, procurement schemes favouring youth-led enterprises and open consultations on technology policy are essential, to ensure legitimacy and trust.

Responsible, inclusive and green technological transformation

24. Youth believe that artificial intelligence should be a tool for inclusion and progress, not division. Youth are concerned that, as highlighted by UNCTAD, the majority of artificial intelligence research and data infrastructure is concentrated in a small number of high-income or technologically advanced countries, which risks entrenching global inequalities. There is a need for artificial intelligence strategies that strengthen local economic resilience and prevent the concentration of technological and economic power in a few regions. Youth therefore call for regional and international cooperation, to develop inclusive and context-sensitive artificial intelligence governance frameworks that ensure technology serves as a driver of shared prosperity rather than a source of division.

25. Youth also note that global governance and regulatory frameworks for artificial intelligence remain fragmented and that the enforcement of existing data protection, data quality and privacy regulations are often weak and insufficient to safeguard users' rights and ensure the ethical use of data.

³ See <https://unctad.org/publication/technology-and-innovation-report-2025>.

Global cooperation

26. At the international level, multilateral collaboration must guide the digital transition. Fragmented artificial intelligence and technology governance risks producing inconsistent standards and widening divides. A coordinated, youth-inclusive approach under United Nations auspices could ensure that ethical principles, data governance and access to frontier technologies align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Investment in a global public digital infrastructure, open-source innovation and capacity-building partnerships must be scaled up, with youth networks as active partners. Equally, there is a need for stronger South–South collaboration, fair access to funding and youth inclusion in policymaking spaces.

27. Governments must recognize youth as co-architects. Formal representation and joint funding schemes between ministries of labour, education and technology can institutionalize such recognition.

III. The future of work and education

28. As the world navigates a period of accelerated change, the future of work and education serves as both a critical challenge and a strategic opportunity. Climate urgency, rapid technological shifts, demographic transitions and new economic models are redefining how societies learn, produce and grow. In developing countries and the least developed countries, youth often face structural barriers, including unequal access to education and innovation ecosystems, outdated institutions and weak legal protections. Yet young people are not only among the most affected, they are also key drivers of transformation.

29. Across classrooms, informal markets and digital platforms, youth are shaping inclusive solutions and resilient livelihoods. Their success depends on both technical training and the cultivation of transversal competencies for human development, such as in adaptability, critical thinking, empathy, digital fluency, ethics and collaboration. To enable this potential, youth urge investment in institutional renewal. Transparency, inclusion and civic participation are the foundations of a sustainable, equitable, secure future in both work and education.

Skills for a changing world

30. To meet the demands of a rapidly evolving labour market, member States should ensure that education and vocational training systems equip youth with twenty-first century skills, including in digital literacy, data analysis, critical thinking and the ability to work with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of things. Youth also call for the promotion of science, technology, engineering and mathematics and of entrepreneurship, as drivers of innovation that empower youth to create sustainable solutions, generate employment and drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth. To ensure safe and responsible digital engagement, member States should also adopt policies on the ethical use of artificial intelligence and provide social media education for youth.

31. Youth also recognize the importance of strengthening transversal competencies, including in communications, collaboration, adaptability and creativity, which are essential for employability. Such competencies help young people navigate changing job markets and work contexts, both formal and informal, as well as cross-border economic activities.

32. Member States and international institutions should promote accessible systems that recognize and certify learning beyond formal education. This can include microcredentials, such as those offered by the United Nations Development Programme Future of Work Academy⁴ and integrated frameworks that validate skills gained through non-formal and experiential programmes, such as UNCTAD Empretec.⁵

⁴ See <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/future-work-academy>.

⁵ See <https://unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec>.

Education for inclusion and opportunity

33. Persistent barriers to quality education continue to affect marginalized groups, particularly girls, Indigenous youth and rural learners. Low levels of school attendance, limited infrastructure and cultural disconnects hinder inclusive development and human capital formation. Youth call for continued efforts to invest in physical and digital infrastructure at all levels of education, particularly early levels, to ensure accessibility. Furthermore, to expand reach and equity, youth recommend supporting non-traditional education channels (e.g. social media, radio, distance schooling and independent studies) to reach underserved communities. In addition, using artificial intelligence-driven adaptive learning platforms to personalize education can help bridge learning gaps. Youth also stress the importance of translating education material into local languages and encouraging culturally relevant content and contexts.

34. Member States are also urged to include youth in the design of national and international education policies. Youth voices are a valuable source of information in building education systems that meet present and future needs.

Meaningful and secure work

35. Youth across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America continue to face high unemployment levels and a mismatch between education and labour market needs. Limited access to quality education, vocational training and decent work opportunities, particularly among vulnerable groups and informal workers, hinders inclusive development. Youth encourage member States to institutionalize youth advisory roles in labour policymaking, ensuring meaningful participation in shaping inclusive employment strategies.

36. The expansion of the gig economy is reshaping the world of work at an unprecedented pace, yet it also exposes young workers to new forms of vulnerability. Across developing economies, millions of young people are engaging in digital and platform-based work without social protection, job security or opportunities for professional growth. This emerging model risks normalizing precariousness, eroding labour rights and trapping youth in cycles of low-skilled and unstable employment. The absence of regulation and collective-bargaining mechanisms leaves them in a permanent state of uncertainty, undermining their human capital formation and long-term productivity. Youth call for ensuring fair conditions, social protection and pathways for skills development within the gig economy, to safeguard the dignity, creativity and economic resilience of young workers.

37. Moreover, member States should recognize the contribution of the informal economy and support the transition of informal workers and enterprises towards formality. Doing so requires improving access to information, finance, training and social protection; and ensuring decent working conditions, job security and access to worker representation.

38. Further, youth call for the promotion of dual-learning models combining academics with apprenticeships in emerging sectors. Access to the labour market can be facilitated through networking events and career fairs at universities and by connecting education to employment through mentorships, internships, project-based learning and personalized, continuous, technology-enabled career guidance.
