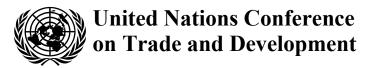**United Nations Conference on Trade and Development**

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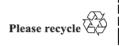Original: English

Sixteenth session

Geneva
20–23 October 2025

Making the digital economy inclusive and sustainable through cooperation

Ministerial round table

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

1.   In her opening remarks, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD emphasized the rapid growth of the digital economy and the potential for inclusive development, particularly in developing countries. She noted that many digital divides persisted, requiring connectivity, skills and enabling digital infrastructures, and noted the need for collective action to bridge such gaps through infrastructure investment, capacity-building and policy reform. The Secretary-General reaffirmed the commitment of UNCTAD to supporting countries, including by fostering digital cooperation as part of the Global Digital Compact and through the eTrade for all initiative.

2.   The round table featured eight panellists: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship, Costa Rica; Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Indonesia; Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Portugal; Secretary-General, Digital Cooperation Organization; Minister of Commerce, Saudi Arabia; Minister of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion, Zimbabwe; Vice-Minister, Ministry of Foreign Trade and Foreign Investment, Cuba; and Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Angkas.

3.   The first panel addressed how countries could address the challenges of rapid digitalization with regard to inclusion and sustainable outcomes, to enable developing countries to benefit more from data, electronic commerce (e-commerce) and digital trade. Several panellists shared national strategies on advancing digital transformation.

4.   One panellist highlighted efforts in Costa Rica to expand connectivity, strengthen skills and introduce trust-instilling regulation. The panellist underscored the need for coherent frameworks on cybersecurity, data privacy and governance, to reduce fragmentation and compliance costs. In addition, the panellist stressed the importance of aligning foreign, domestic and trade-related policies and maintaining the World Trade Organization moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions.

5.   Another panellist outlined the five-pronged digital vision for 2045 of Indonesia, involving infrastructure, investment, regulation, inclusion and skills for microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises. The panellist highlighted collaboration with UNCTAD on an e-trade readiness assessment, which served as a blueprint to guide investment and reforms, and encouraged similar support for other developing countries.

6.   One panellist detailed the people-centred digital strategy in Portugal, emphasizing universal connectivity, skills and trusted digital services. The panellist underscored the importance of partnerships of equals among Governments, the private sector and civil society, citing cross-country cooperation and engagement in United Nations forums.

7.   Another panellist noted the need for more aligned governance approaches across countries. The panellist recommended providing guidance, to help countries develop interoperable regulatory frameworks.

8.   During the ensuing discussion, several panellists underlined that, while digitalization offered new opportunities, gaps in connectivity, skills, governance and environmental impact risks were widening inequalities. The panellists agreed that trust and interoperability were essential for a predictable digital economy. With regard to international cooperation, the panellists noted the need for coherent national and global frameworks for inclusive digital transformations. Finally, the panellists identified the following priority actions: developing interoperable and trusted data governance frameworks; investing in public digital infrastructure; strengthening digital literacy and skills, to empower citizens and businesses; and aligning and measuring the impacts of digital and trade policies nationally and internationally, to foster inclusive growth.

9.   The second panel discussion involved an international perspective, examining the forms of global cooperation and support most urgently needed to ensure that digitalization served to advance on inclusive and sustainable development.

10.   One panellist highlighted that a robust legal framework was a significant pillar of the national digital strategy and advancement in Saudi Arabia. The panellist detailed how streamlined digital platforms and one-stop business hubs could empower small and medium-sized enterprises to access services efficiently and thrive in the digital economy. In this regard, investments in infrastructure and emerging technologies, along with partnerships with international organizations, were key.

11.   Another panellist stressed the importance of investing in infrastructure and emerging technology, including, in Zimbabwe, high-performance computing; data centres; rural connectivity solutions, critical for artificial intelligence readiness; and a broader digital transformation. Drawing on national experiences, the panellist emphasized that international support was key in advancing policies in important areas such as regulation, digital payments, taxation and digital trade.

12.   One panellist emphasized that international support and investing in infrastructure and emerging technology were critical, including technology parks. The panellist noted that, in Cuba, partnerships with international organizations, including UNCTAD, had been instrumental in sharing best practices, accelerating knowledge transfer and fostering collaboration that advanced digital economy projects and investment.

13.   Another panellist highlighted that international support was key in strengthening the capacity of local digital entrepreneurs, particularly at early stages of growth, and noted the contributions of donors and the UNCTAD e-trade for women initiative in empowering women digital entrepreneurs. In addition, with regard to inclusive digital development, the panellist stressed that protecting local innovators, fostering entrepreneurial mind sets and supporting equitable participation, particularly for women entrepreneurs, could generate broad economic and community-related benefits.

14.   During the ensuing discussion, with regard to policy and legal frameworks, several panellists underscored the importance of strengthening regulatory and policy frameworks for an inclusive and secure digital transformation. All panellists highlighted the critical role of international support and partnerships and underscored the following key areas of support in promoting inclusive and sustainable digitalization: establish common global standards for seamless digital trade; foster international cooperation to ensure that all countries can participate in the global digital economy; and support local businesses, including women entrepreneurs, to scale and enhance competitiveness globally.

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