United Nations TD/INF.86

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Distr.: General
5 March 2026

English only

Sixteenth session
Geneva
20–23 October 2025

Changemakers for sustainable trade: Advancing circular and biodiversity-based economies

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

1. In his opening remarks, the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD stressed that sustainability was not optional but essential. He noted that biodiversity-related goods already accounted for 17 per cent of global trade, and that UNCTAD programmes such as the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution programme and the BioTrade Initiative were helping countries to trade sustainably.

2. The parallel event, following opening remarks by the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD, featured six panellists: Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Cameroon to the United Nations Office at Geneva; Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations Office at Geneva; Head, Trade Promotion, State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, Switzerland; Founder, Chief Executive Officer, Catchgreen, South Africa; Component Manager, Access and Benefit-sharing–Compliant Biotrade in South(ern) Africa, and Bio Innovation Africa, South Africa; and Project Director, Leathertrace Bangladesh, and Project Director, Fresh Produce Impact Hub, Ghana. The event highlighted the transformative potential of circular and biodiversity-based economies in driving sustainable trade, particularly in developing countries.

3. The Founder and Creation Director, Maison Pierre Marcolini, in his keynote address, detailed work with cocoa farmers in order to develop chocolates “from bean to bar”, preserving native varieties and ensuring fair compensation. He emphasized that, at present, consumers demanded authenticity and traceability and stated that artisanal producers could compete through storytelling and by embracing openness.

4. One panellist emphasized the need to transform cocoa into a model for sustainable trade, with financial instruments and public–private partnerships supporting youth and women-led initiatives. In Cameroon, however, infrastructure challenges and limited market access continued to hinder progress. He noted the need for regional cooperation and capacity-building to ensure that the implementation of new environmental regulations led to competitiveness instead of excluding small producers.

5. Another panellist underscored the importance of empowering local entrepreneurs and small producers. She stated that sustainability requirements needed to become a source of competitiveness, not marginalization.

6. One panellist, noting that Switzerland had long been a supporter of the BioTrade Initiative, highlighted the integrated approach of the Government of Switzerland to

sustainability, combining the economic, social and environmental dimensions. Official development assistance programmes of Switzerland supported living incomes, diversified forest systems, respect for human rights and traceable value chains. The panellist stressed the need to more explicitly integrate voluntary sustainability standards and credit access in policy and noted that public–private partnerships were essential in defining practical paths forward.

7. Another panellist described biodegradable fishing equipment as a solution to marine pollution. She noted that trade frameworks needed to support such innovations, citing high tariffs (for example, 30 per cent for exports from South Africa to Kenya) as barriers. In addition, she noted the need for new standards and Harmonized System codes for sustainable materials, and for trade policy to reward rather than penalize innovation.

8. One panellist described the implementation of the UNCTAD BioTrade Principles and Criteria, to guide inclusive value chain development. The Access and Benefit-sharing–Compliant Biotrade in South(ern) Africa programme offered co-funded grants and sector development strategies and had developed tools to categorize microenterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises by growth stage, enabling tailored support.

9. Another panellist detailed the following two projects supported by the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution programme: in Ghana, the development of non-plastic substitutes for agriculture; and in Bangladesh, pilot electronic traceability systems for sustainable leather exports. He stressed that traceability should not become a trade barrier and requested UNCTAD to continue to support inclusive systems that empowered smallholders.

10. During the ensuing discussion, the panellists, emphasizing that biodiversity loss and climate change were global challenges that urgently required solutions and that trade needed to evolve to become a force for nature, equity and resilience, stressed the importance of empowering local entrepreneurs and small producers and that sustainability requirements needed to become a source of competitiveness. In this regard, there was a need for stable regulatory frameworks, inclusive trade policies and continued support from UNCTAD, to scale up successful models. With regard to the role of technology and data in advancing sustainability, the discussion served to note that digital tools could enhance transparency, traceability and consumer trust but, without adequate support, small producers could be excluded from digital-based trade ecosystems. One participant highlighted that UNCTAD could recognize credible certification systems that facilitated market access for smallholder forest enterprises. In addition, UNCTAD was requested to help countries to develop digital infrastructure and capacity-building programmes, to facilitate compliance by small producers with sustainability standards and regulations. Participants broadly emphasized the need for systemic change, inclusive dialogue, whole-of-society approaches and a reform of the subsidies system. There was a need for stronger South–South cooperation, strategic public–private partnerships and intentional support for entrepreneurs in the global South. The discussion served to show how sustainability-driven trade could deliver tangible benefits for people and the planet.