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FACTS & FIGURES

UNCTAD16

Turning uncertainty into opportunity - driving economic transformation for growth

The sixteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD16) take place in Geneva (20-23 October 2025), amid rising debt, weak investment and widening digital divides. The uncertainty also creates an opportunity to rethink the global economy. Under the theme "Shaping the future: Driving economic transformation for equitable, inclusive and sustainable development," UNCTAD16 will gather policymakers, investors and innovators to align trade, finance, investment and technology behind one goal: making growth fairer, greener and more resilient.

What's inside

The following brief distils the main messages and trends shaping UNCTAD16, from investment and debt to trade, innovation and digital transformation. It outlines the conference's core focus on practical solutions to global fragility and how UNCTAD's convening power can help turn today's uncertainty into a driver of recovery and transformation.

UNCTAD 16 GENEVA 20–23 OCTOBER 2025

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FACTS & FIGURES

A world of opportunity — if we act now…

- *Cautious optimism.* Despite a fragile global economy, new technologies, shifting investment flows and stronger cooperation offer scope to reshape growth and make it more sustainable.
- *Investment bright spots*. While overall investment is down, digital and AI-related sectors are expanding, creating jobs and innovation hubs across developing regions.
- *Trade remains vital.* Global trade in goods and services exceeded $33 trillion in 2024, close to 30% of global GDP, powering growth, jobs and development.
- *Africa's momentum.* Africa saw record FDI growth of 75% in 2024, reflecting reforms and new digital and clean-energy projects.
- *Technology for progress.* Advances in AI and digital infrastructure can help developing economies move into higher-value industries, if backed by the right policies.

…But growing uncertainty is holding back progress

- *Falling investment.* Global FDI dropped 11% in 2024 and is expected to fall another 6% in 2025. Investment in renewable energy, transport and water declined by more than 30%.
- *Rising debt.* Developing countries now face a $4 trillion annual financing gap, up from $2.5 trillion in 2015. In 2024, they paid $921 billion in interest on their debt — more than their combined spending on health or education.
- *Trade tensions.* Average tariffs in major economies, including the United States, have surged from 2.6% to about 18% in 2025, disrupting supply chains and heightening uncertainty.
- *Policy unpredictability.* Eroding trade rules and intensifying competition for critical raw materials are slowing trade-led growth.
- *Digital divide.* Digital FDI in developing countries nearly doubled since 2022, but least developed economies still account for only 15% of digitally deliverable services exports, compared with 60% in advanced economies.

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- *The result is a convergence of pressures.* Limited fiscal space, fragile trade relations, falling investment and uneven technological transformation. Without coordinated action, the global inequalities will deepen.

How UNCTAD16 can help

UNCTAD16's convening power brings together governments, the private sector, experts and innovators to find practical ways to turn uncertainty into opportunity. It is uniquely suited to foster dialogue and design actionable, non-binding solutions that align finance, trade, investment and technology for sustainable development.

- *Reform the financial system.* Build consensus for quicker, fairer debt resolution and a financial architecture that channels investment toward development priorities.
- *Direct investment where it matters most.* Highlight proven ways to attract and facilitate investment in priority sectors such as renewable energy and digital infrastructure.
- *Rebuild trade resilience.* Tackle supply-chain fragmentation and tariff escalation while expanding trade in services and critical minerals to strengthen resilience. Reaffirm commitment to predictable, rules-based trade as the basis for stability and trust.
- *Bridge the digital divide*. Advance cooperation through the Global Digital Compact and WSIS+20 to ensure all countries benefit from AI and digital transformation. Promote inclusive data and digital governance frameworks that expand participation and empower entrepreneurs, women and youth.

What UNCTAD is doing more broadly – some examples

Evidence and analysis. UNCTAD's flagship reports — World Investment Report 2025, Digital Economy Report 2024, Technology and Innovation Report 2025 and the Global Trade Update series — offer authoritative insight on global trends in finance, investment, trade and digitalization for sustainable growth.

Technical assistance and capacity-building. The Debt Management and Financial Analysis System (DMFAS) helps 75 countries strengthen debt management and transparency… Investment policy reviews and advisory services help countries improve legal and institutional frameworks to attract productive investment. BioTrade and the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution programme demonstrate how trade and environmental stewardship can generate jobs, improve livelihoods and protect ecosystems. The eTrade for All and eTrade for Women initiatives expand access to e-commerce and empower entrepreneurs in developing countries.

Consensus-building and partnerships. UNCTAD co-leads the UN Secretary-General's Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals, promoting fair value sharing and sustainability across mineral supply chains. It leads multilateral dialogues on the Global Digital Compact and international financial reform, ensuring every country has a voice in shaping a fairer global economy.

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The world has capital, technology, knowledge and trade networks to achieve sustainable growth. What is missing is coordination and fairness. UNCTAD16 is a chance to bring these elements together, turn uncertainty into opportunity and make finance, trade, investment and innovation work for development.

About UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

UNCTAD is the UN's leading body on trade and development. Founded in 1964, it supports 195 member states with expert analysis, technical assistance, and serves as a platform for intergovernmental dialogue.

UNCTAD helps developing countries make trade, finance, investment, and the digital economy work for inclusive and sustainable development.