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UNCTAD16 opens in Geneva amid deep trade uncertainty

Global forum sets four-year mandate as leaders chart paths to resilient, inclusive growth.

Geneva, 20 October 2025

- Quadrennial meeting sets UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD)'s mandate and priorities for the next four years.
- More than 40 high-level sessions on trade, investment, debt, digital and supply chain resilience.
- UN Secretary-General António Guterres to address the conference on 22 October.
- Federal Councilor Guy Parmelin of Switzerland, host country of UNCTAD16, elected by acclamation as president of the conference.

The 16th United Nations Conference on Trade and Development ([UNCTAD16](#)) opens today in Geneva under the theme **“Shaping the future: Driving economic transformation for equitable, inclusive and sustainable development.”**

The four-day conference (20-23 October) convenes ministers of trade and economy, leaders of international organizations, representatives of civil society, private sector, youth and renowned experts to engage in high-level dialogue on global trends and policy



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perspectives on trade, finance and debt, investment, development and the digital economy.

Mandate-setting moment

The quadrennial conference is UNCTAD's highest decision-making body, bringing together **195 Member States** to assess pressing trade and development issues, weigh policy options and craft multilateral responses.

What's on the agenda

Across **more than 40 high-level sessions**, ministerial roundtables and events, delegates will focus on practical routes to resilient supply chains, fairer finance, productive investment and an inclusive digital economy.

Discussions will examine how countries can navigate today's uncertainties while laying foundations for sustainable growth that benefits everyone, everywhere.

UN Secretary-General **António Guterres** will address UNCTAD16 on **22 October**.

Federal Councilor Guy Parmelin of Switzerland said: "Let's remain faithful to tradition of international Geneva and find consensus by looking at the diverse points of view and ensuring that we stimulate the economy with a view to achieving fair, inclusive and lasting development."

'Shaping the future': Message from UNCTAD

In her opening address, UNCTAD Secretary-General Rebeca Grynspan warned that uncertainty, debt and falling investment are weighing heavily on the world's poorest countries.

Yet Ms Grynspan highlighted that major shifts – from new trade patterns and resilient services to clean technologies and artificial intelligence – offer a chance to reshape the global economy for greater inclusion and resilience.

She stressed that the key question is not whether change will happen, but who will steer it and for whose benefit.

"We've come here to shape the future, together, so that trade, investment and technology work for people, not the other way around," Ms Grynspan said.

Historic crossroads urging collective response

The world is at a crossroads that calls for a fundamental shift in development mindset, global leaders say in their remarks to the UNCTAD16 opening ceremony.

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President José Ramos-Horta of Timor Leste, speaking via video message, called for a renewed commitment to rebalance the rules of global commerce, decisive action on debt, bridge the digital divide and ensure climate justice is reflected in trade and investment, especially for least developed countries.

Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính of Viet Nam, in his video message, called for bold and effective reforms to the multilateral trading and financial systems, while reaffirming his country's support for the UN's central role in tackling "global and people-centred issues" linked to sustainable development.

Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley of Barbados, in a pre-recorded message, praised the "transformative response" of UNCTAD in carrying out the Bridgetown Covenant adopted at the organization's 15th quadrennial conference held in Barbados.

"We must empower UNCTAD to be that space, where new global consensus on links between trade and development are forged for the prosperity of all," said the prime minister.

Multilateralism in action at UNCTAD16

UNCTAD16 takes place amid wide-ranging reform efforts aimed at making the United Nations and the multilateral system better adapted to pressing challenges now and into the future.

"Progress in trade and development is critical to that renewal, said **Annalena Baerbock, President of the UN General Assembly**.

The president urged countries to ensure that trade uplifts rather than divides, empowers rather than excludes: "Because a more equitable global economy is essential to demonstrating that multilateralism still works for all."

The momentum is ramping up, said **Director-General Tatiana Valovaya of the UN Office at Geneva**, encouraging participants to seize it with "clarity, courage and collective resolve".

"This (UNCTAD16) conference may serve as a space for bold ideas, innovative partnerships and renewed determination to build resilient, sustainable and inclusive future for all," Ms Volovaya concluded.

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.