E-commerce and Digital Economy Programme

Year in Review 2024

Summary

UN trade & development
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Message from Torbjörn Fredriksson, Head, E-commerce and Digital Economy Branch

In 2024, UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) celebrated its 60th anniversary. Ever since its inception, technology has been an integral part of the mandate of the organization. At that time, member States had identified that technology and technical know-how were essential preconditions for improving productivity, promoting export growth and advancing development. They also recognized the growing technological gap between developed and developing countries, its implications for trade and development, and for their own prospects for catching up.

While the discussion that took place in the 1960s remains highly relevant today, prime attention has now shifted to digital technologies. Key global debates in 2024 reconfirmed the relevance of the ECDE Programme.

In September, world leaders in New York agreed on the Pact for the Future, which contains the Global Digital Compact (GDC). Commitments in the Compact are well aligned with the mission of the ECDE Programme. They stress, for example, the importance of bridging digital divides, achieving more inclusive and sustainable digital economies, and developing better governance of data. UNCTAD will in the coming years be playing a key role in facilitating the implementation of the GDC.

The *Digital Economy Report 2024* was launched in July, stressing the need to better understand and address the environmental footprint of digitalization. While the power of digital technologies can help to advance inclusive and sustainable development, we also need to mitigate their negative environmental impacts. The report calls for a shift towards a circular digital economy, characterized by responsible consumption and production, renewable energy use and comprehensive e-waste management.

Our work continued to contribute to strengthening the readiness of countries to benefit from the digital economy through new eTrade Readiness Assessments, e-commerce strategies and other forms of assistance. For example, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago entrusted us to prepare an eTrade Readiness Assessment and support the development of its new National E-commerce Strategy. We were also pleased to respond to the request of Indonesia, the first G20 country to benefit from our assistance in this area.

In 2024, the focus on implementation of policy reforms in partner countries intensified. In May, more than 250 experts from 77 countries met over three days at the Intergovernmental Group of Experts on E-commerce and the Digital Economy to discuss and agree on recommendations on how to move from assessments to implementation. This also offered an opportunity to demonstrate the eTrade Reform Tracker, which is now seeing growing demand from partner countries.

We welcomed a new cohort of eTrade for Women Advocates, and together with Ms. Ajaita Shah of India, we delivered our first regional Masterclass for South Asia, in New Delhi. Supported by the Government of China, we also accompanied 31 women digital entrepreneurs from 12 developing countries on a study tour of Beijing and Shanghai's leading digital players. By the end of the year, more than 330 women founders of businesses in the digital economy around the world had joined the eTrade for Women communities.

Another key area of work was the measurement of e-commerce and digital trade. Together with partner organizations, we leveraged the *Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade* in several capacity-building workshops around the world. The newly established Task Group on Measuring the Value of E-commerce led by UNCTAD held four meetings, advancing towards the development of guidelines in this area.

Peering into the future, 2025 will be an important year. It will see the beginning of the implementation of the GDC, where UNCTAD will play a leading role especially in the areas of data governance and building an inclusive digital economy.

The international community will complete the Review of the first 20 years of implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), to which we will contribute. The ECDE Programme will furthermore be supporting the BRICS Presidency and the G20 Presidency in the digital domain. And in October, UNCTAD will hold its 16th Ministerial Conference in Viet Nam, where member States will chart the path forward for the organization and define the priorities of its work in developing countries, and notably in the least developed countries. The digital dimension is set to be re-emphasized.

I am grateful for the trust that member States and our development partners continue to place in the ECDE Programme. The work on shaping an inclusive digital economy is still very much work at an early stage. Working closely with our partners has become more essential than ever for moving the needle in the evolving digital economy towards more favourable development outcomes.

The entire team of the ECDE Programme looks forward to further connecting the dots with you.

Torbjörn Fredriksson

Summary

The E-commerce and Digital Economy (ECDE) Programme provides policymakers and other key stakeholders, notably women digital entrepreneurs, with the knowledge, capacities, and dialogue avenues to take development-led actions towards an inclusive and sustainable digital future for all. Through the Programme, UNCTAD works with government officials and development partners, representatives of civil society and the private sector, to strengthen the readiness of developing countries to harness the opportunities and address the risks presented by digitalization and the rise of e-commerce and digital trade in particular.
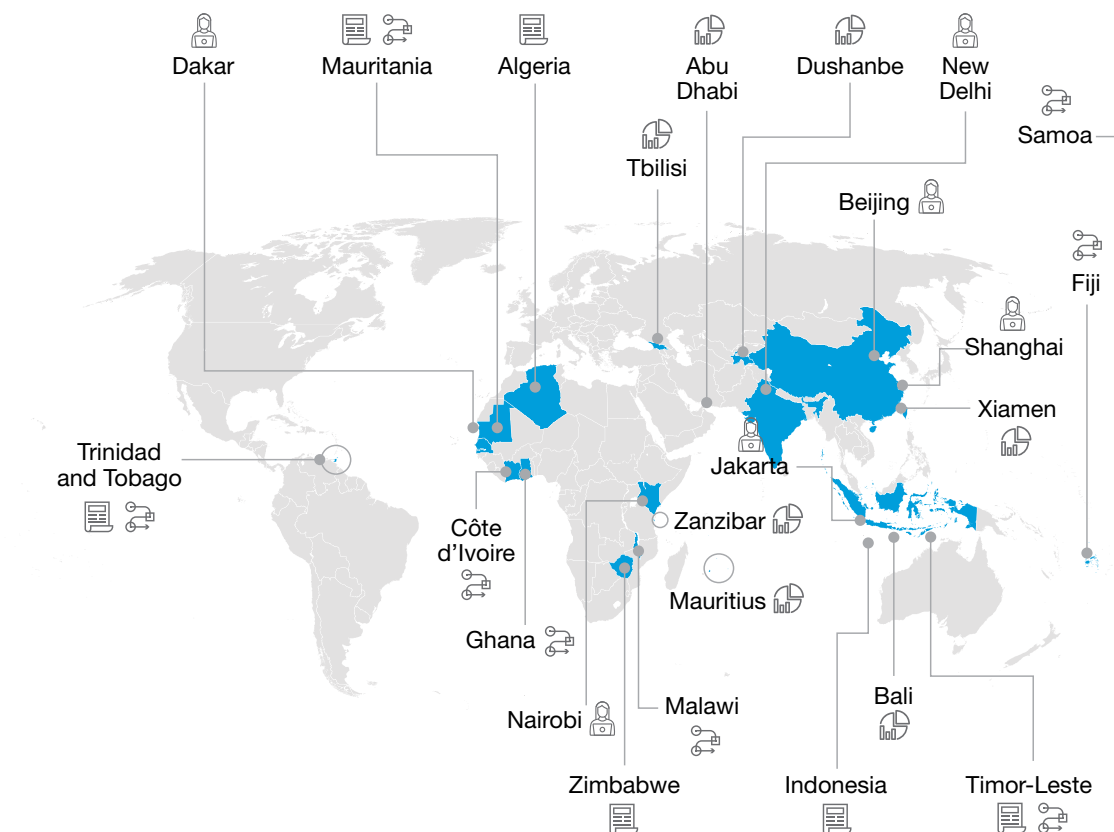
Enhancing understanding

The Digital Economy Report (DER) 2024, titled "Shaping an environmentally sustainable and inclusive digital future", was launched in July, underscoring the pressing need for sustainable strategies throughout the lifecycle of digitalization. The report calls for a global shift towards a circular digital economy and for bold actions from policymakers, industry leaders, and consumers to mitigate the environmental repercussions of rapid digital transformation, which disproportionately affect developing countries. By the end of 2024, the report had been downloaded over 37,000 times and mentioned in some 260 posts on social media, sparking a wide-reaching discussion that resonated in high-level fora such as the Second Committee of the United Nations General Assembly in New York and regional events in Geneva, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Bangkok, New Delhi, and Beijing.

New research and analysis publications included the second edition of the Pacific Digital Economy Report, dedicated to *"Promoting Digital Entrepreneurship and Trade"*, a *"Gap analysis of Cyberlaws in Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS)"*, and a policy review of "Indirect taxation of e-commerce and digital trade: implications for developing countries". Updated digital economy statistics informed a technical note on "Business e-commerce sales and the role of online platforms".

Map 1
Where we worked in 2024

Dakar · Mauritania · Algeria · Abu Dhabi · Dushanbe · New Delhi · Samoa · Tbilisi · Beijing · Fiji · Shanghai · Trinidad and Tobago · Xiamen · Jakarta · Côte d'Ivoire · Zanzibar · Ghana · Mauritius · Bali · Nairobi · Malawi · Zimbabwe · Indonesia · Timor-Leste

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Legend:

eT Ready	E-Commerce Strategy or Action Plan
Measurement (regional)*	eTrade for Women (regional)

*Includes capacity-building activities on measurement jointly organized with the IMF, OECD, World Bank, WTO and other parts of the UN.

Source: UNCTAD 2024.

Strengthening capacities

The Programme undertook the 40th eTrade Readiness Assessment (eT Ready) and continued to support developing countries in building their preparedness to benefit from the digital economy through new e-commerce strategies and assistance for their implementation. Two eT Readies were completed in 2024 - for Timor-Leste and Trinidad and Tobago, while work continued in Algeria and Zimbabwe and a new assessment commenced in Indonesia – the first G20 country to benefit from UNCTAD assistance in this area.

Fiji, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mauritania, and Trinidad and Tobago were supported to develop national e-commerce strategies/policies, in most cases as a follow-up to an eT Ready. The strategy of Fiji, which builds on the findings of the National E-commerce Assessment (2020) led by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and which aligns with the Pacific Regional E-commerce Strategy and Roadmap, received Cabinet endorsement in May. The strategy of Côte d'Ivoire, which follows on from the eT Ready completed in 2021 and is aligned with the regional E-commerce Strategy of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), was endorsed in September.

To further support implementation, an eTrade capacity-building workshop was organized in May in conjunction with the 7th session of the Intergovernmental Group of Experts (IGE) on E-commerce and the Digital Economy, thus enabling 28 Focal Points (including 8 women) from partner countries and Regional Economic Communities across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean, to participate in both events. An interactive demonstration of the functionalities of the eTrade Reform Tracker triggered official requests for its deployment from Kenya, Mauritania, Fiji and Solomon Islands.
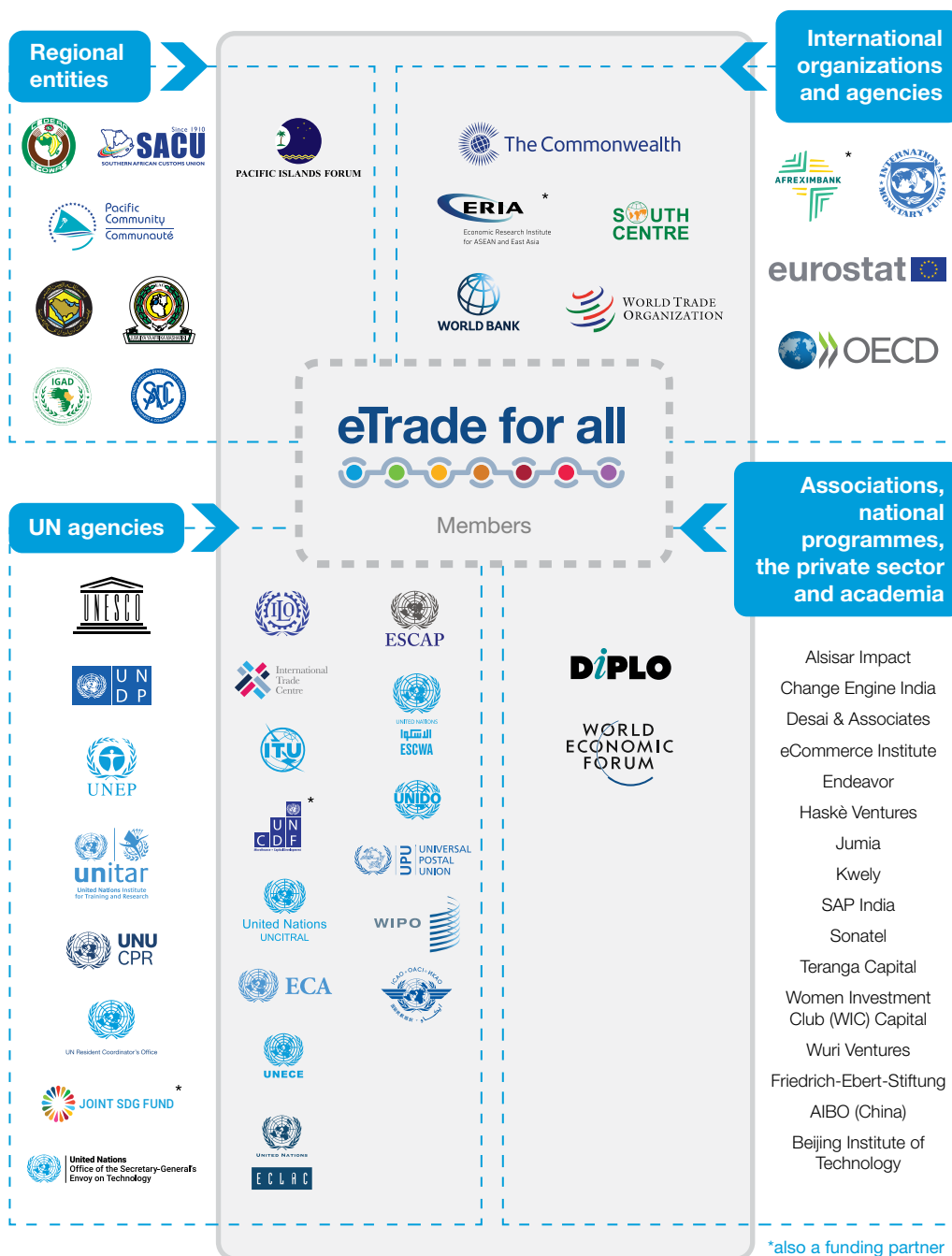
In the area of e-commerce and digital economy measurement, working closely with the IMF, OECD, World Bank, WTO and other parts of the UN, the Programme delivered in-person training to close to 300 participants from National Statistical Offices, Central Banks and other relevant agencies of countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This represents a three-fold increase in reach compared to 2023, with almost half of participants being women. Online delivery was also used to raise awareness of digital trade concepts and measurement among a wider audience, especially policymakers.

Throughout all technical cooperation and capacity-building activities, the Programme sought to collaborate with other parts of UNCTAD and effectively leverage synergies with *eTrade for all* partners and others.[1]

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[1]   Intra-institutional collaboration took place with TrainForTrade, the Statistics Service, and colleagues working on the topics of trade facilitation and logistics, competition and consumer protection in particular.

ECDE Partners in 2024

Funding partners

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Regional entities

PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

ECOWAS

SACU SOUTHERN AFRICAN CUSTOMS UNION Since 1910

Pacific Community Communauté

IGAD

International organizations and agencies

The Commonwealth

ERIA * Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia

S⚙UTH CENTRE

WORLD BANK

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

AFREXIMBANK *

INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND

eurostat

OECD

eTrade for all

Members

Associations, national programmes, the private sector and academia

Alsisar Impact
Change Engine India
Desai & Associates
eCommerce Institute
Endeavor
Haskè Ventures
Jumia
Kwely
SAP India
Sonatel
Teranga Capital
Women Investment Club (WIC) Capital
Wuri Ventures
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
AIBO (China)
Beijing Institute of Technology

UN agencies

UNESCO

U N D P

UNEP

unitar United Nations Institute for Training and Research

UNU CPR

UN Resident Coordinator's Office

JOINT SDG FUND *

United Nations Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology

ILO

International Trade Centre

ITU

U N C D F

United Nations UNCITRAL

ECA

UNECE

UNITED NATIONS ECLAC

ESCAP

UNITED NATIONS ESCWA

UNIDO

UPU UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION

WIPO

ICAO · OACI · ИКАО

DiPLO

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

*also a funding partner

Empowering women digital entrepreneurs

The eTrade for Women initiative reached new heights with its expansion into South Asia. By the end of the year, the initiative had supported over 350 women entrepreneurs from 65 countries across Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Balkans, and the Arab region, to enable them to scale their businesses, drive digitalization in their ecosystems, and foster more inclusive growth.

Key developments included the appointment of five new Advocates and the delivery, in partnership with the Advocates for French-speaking Africa and South Asia, of two in-person Masterclasses that brought together a total of 43 women entrepreneurs from 15 countries. Thirty-one women from 12 countries also benefited from a 10-day study tour on *Empowering Women Entrepreneurs from the Global South in E-commerce and Digital Businesses*, delivered in close collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, and its Academy for International Business Officials (AIBO).

With the support of the eTrade for Women Community Leaders, more than 30 business, leadership and networking-oriented events were organized, including two in-person regional gatherings in Nairobi and Jakarta. At the global and regional level, eTrade for Women engaged in 20 policy dialogue events, ensuring that women's perspectives are considered in the formulation of digital economy policies. These included, among others, the 9th Aid-for-Trade Global Review in Geneva, a roundtable discussion during the high-level week of the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the validation workshop for the draft National E-commerce Strategy of Côte d'Ivoire in Abidjan, and consultations on AfCFTA Implementation Strategies in Nairobi.

A new online platform dedicated to Community members was launched, serving as a hub to connect, network, share good practices, access valuable resources, and enroll in the eTrade for Women Academy, which provides self-paced training and learning resources tailored to members' specific challenges and needs. Five courses tackling key topics, such as access to finance and design thinking, were attended by 70 women digital entrepreneurs from the 5 regions where the initiative is active.

A new research study in partnership with ESCP Business School (France) and GIBS Business School – University of Pretoria (South Africa) sought to deepen the understanding of the unique experiences, challenges, and success factors that define the journeys of women digital entrepreneurs in Africa.

ECDE Programme highlights in 2024

MARCH
publication of
eT Ready report
for Mauritania

APRIL
eTrade for Women
Masterclass for
French-speaking Africa;
4th meeting of the Core
Donor Advisory Board

JUNE
UNCTAD@60

MAY
7th session of the IGE
on E-commerce and
the Digital Economy,
eTrade capacity-building
workshop, eTrade for
Women Induction Week

JULY
launch
of the Digital
Economy
Report 2024

AUGUST
launch of
TG-eCOM
online platform

OCTOBER
United Nations
General Assembly
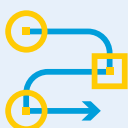Second
Committee side
event on DER
2024

SEPTEMBER
adoption of the Pact for
the Future and the Global
Digital Compact, 20 years
of the Partnership on Measuring
ICT for Development, discussion
of the DER 2024 by the UNCTAD
Trade and Development Board

NOVEMBER
eTrade for Women study
tour in China, joint
UNCTAD-OECD
workshop on
e-commerce
definition and
guidelines

DECEMBER
first eTrade for Women
Masterclass for South Asia;
5th meeting of the Working
Group on Measuring
E-commerce and
the Digital Economy

Building consensus

UNCTAD contributed to the development of the Global Digital Compact (GDC) – a multilateral initiative aimed at fostering an inclusive, secure, and equitable digital environment, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at its 79th session in September.[2] UNCTAD will play an active role in implementing the GDC - as a member of the Working Group on Digital Technologies (WGDT), as well as co-lead of the sub-group responsible for Objective 2 of the GDC, which focuses on expanding inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy, and Objective 4, which focuses on advancing responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches.

The 7th session of the IGE on E-commerce and the Digital Economy was held in May in conjunction with the eTrade capacity-building workshop, emphasizing the urgent need for developing countries to build digital readiness amid unabated global crises and rising inequalities. The session delivered as a main outcome a set of agreed policy recommendations that underscored the importance of aligning digital development with the Sustainable Development Goals through the GDC.

The work of the Task Group on Measuring E-commerce Value (TG-eCOM) gathered speed, with the August launch of a members-only online platform that hosts meeting materials and records, as well as an online forum for discussions and tools to enable collaborative work. A joint workshop with the OECD Working Party on Digital Economics, Measurement, and Analysis (WPDEMA) in November provided an opportunity to discuss experiences and challenges related to interpreting and operationalizing the OECD 2009 definition of e-commerce and its supporting guidelines.

Fostering collaboration

eTrade for all partners continued to actively contribute to advancing e-commerce and the digital economy in and for developing countries. A total of 22 partners engaged in various UNCTAD-led activities, including 13 partners supporting eTrade Readiness Assessments, e-commerce strategies and their implementation, 9 contributing to eTrade for Women activities, and 12 involved in research, analysis and measurement. Ten editions of the *eTrade for all* newsletter were released to an audience of some 5,400 subscribers.

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[2]   See more at https://www.un.org/digital-emerging-technologies/global-digital-compact.

Communications and outreach

5 **publications**
were released in 2024

>160,000 **downloads**
of ECDE publications
in 2024[3]

The Digital Economy
Report 2024 was
covered by more than
300 media outlets
in 15 languages.

Its message was disseminated
on social media in the
10 languages
of UN News

The Programme's X handle,
@ECDEatUNCTAD,
remains the
4th largest account
in UNCTAD, with

8,200+
followers
as of December 2024.

The *eTrade for all*
platform

attracted more than
50,000 visitors
with approximately
half originating
from developing
countries

10 issues
of the **eTrade for all newsletter**
continued to provide relevant content
to a **growing** audience base.

The newsletter's 'open'
and 'click' rates increased by
17% and 31%
respectively on an annual basis.

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[3]   Covers publications released in 2019-2024.

Evaluation and transparency

An independent evaluation of the Programme began in November, to be completed in early 2025. The evaluation covers the three-year period from 2022 to 2024 and will include an assessment of progress since the previous evaluation as well as strategic recommendations for programme development.[4]

To enhance transparency of activities and results, in December the Programme initiated reporting in the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) data standard. This first set of data published on the IATI registry by the Programme marked the beginning of UNCTAD's journey with IATI.

Looking ahead to 2025 and beyond

The Programme will play an active role in the implementation of the GDC, notably with regard to supporting member States in delivering on the commitments and actions to close digital divides, expand inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy for all, and advance responsible, equitable and interoperable approaches to data governance. This includes support to a dedicated working group to be established under the CSTD, to engage in a comprehensive and inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogue on data governance at all levels as relevant for development.

In the area of e-trade readiness, the Programme's main goals and objectives include new eT Readies (e.g., for Indonesia) and e-commerce strategies (e.g., for Mauritania), as well as sustained support for their implementation. This will include a review of implementation progress as well as the deployment of the eTrade Reform Tracker, starting with Solomon Islands and

Fiji. Other planned activities in the Pacific include assisting Solomon Islands with the development of data privacy and protection legislation, supporting the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in creating a set of digital economy indicators and an accompanying action plan, and organizing a regional workshop on measuring digital trade.

The eTrade for Women initiative will appoint a new Advocate for Latin America and the Caribbean and organize three Masterclasses - in Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines, with the support of the regional Advocates. It will welcome a new cohort of Community Leaders, and the new regional Community for South Asia will pick up speed. Findings from the first research project on the challenges of women digital entrepreneurs in Africa will be released and disseminated widely at the global and regional level.

The 8th session of the IGE on E-commerce and the Digital Economy will be held on 12-14 May 2025 on the topic "Making digitalization work for inclusive and sustainable development". The Programme will also support the Digital Economy Working Group under the South African G20 Presidency and contribute to the discussions on digitalization in trade and development envisaged as part of UNCTAD's sixteenth Ministerial Conference to be held in Viet Nam in October.

The Programme will continue to seek synergies with *eTrade for all* and other partners for joint activities and increased impact. As chair of United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS) in 2025-26, it will also seek to contribute to advancing policy coherence and programme coordination on matters related to information, as well as lend support to the 20-year Review of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20).

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[4]   See https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osginf2022d5_en.pdf.

unctad.org