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DIGITAL ECONOMY REPORT 2021

Cross-border data flows and development:
For whom the data flow

OVERVIEW



UNITED NATIONS

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

UNCTAD



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Note

Within the UNCTAD Division on Technology and Logistics, the ICT Policy Section carries out policy-oriented analytical work on the development implications of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and e-commerce. It is responsible for the preparation of the *Digital Economy Report*, previously known as the Information Economy Report. The ICT Policy Section promotes international dialogue on issues related to ICTs for development, and contributes to building developing countries' capacities to measure e-commerce and the digital economy and to design and implement relevant policies and legal frameworks. The Section also manages the *eTrade for all* initiative.

In this Report, the terms country/economy refer, as appropriate, to territories or areas. The designations of country groups are intended solely for statistical or analytical convenience, and do not necessarily express a judgement about the stage of development reached by a particular country or area in the development process. Unless otherwise indicated, the major country groupings used in this Report follow the classification of the United Nations Statistical Office. These are:

Developed countries: the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (other than Chile, Mexico, the Republic of Korea and Turkey), plus the European Union member countries that are not OECD members (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta and Romania), plus Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino. *Countries with economies in transition* refers to those in South-East Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. *Developing economies* in general are all the economies that are not specified above. For statistical purposes, the data for China do not include those for Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (Hong Kong, China), Macao Special Administrative Region of China (Macao, China) or Taiwan Province of China. An excel file with the main country groupings used can be downloaded from UNCTADstat at: <http://unctadstat.unctad.org/EN/Classifications.html>.

References to Latin America include the Caribbean countries, unless otherwise indicated.

References to sub-Saharan Africa include South Africa, unless otherwise indicated.

References to the United States are to the United States of America, and to the United Kingdom are to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The term “dollars” (\$) refers to United States dollars, unless otherwise indicated.

The term “billion” signifies 1,000 million.

The following symbols may have been used in the tables:

Two dots (..) indicate that data are not available or are not separately reported.

Rows in tables have been omitted in those cases where no data are available for any of the elements in the row.

A dash (–) indicates that the item is equal to zero or its value is negligible.

A blank in a table indicates that the item is not applicable, unless otherwise indicated.

A slash (/) between dates representing years, e.g. 1994/95, indicates a financial year.

Use of an en dash (–) between dates representing years, e.g. 1994–1995, signifies the full period involved, including the beginning and end years.

Annual rates of growth or change, unless otherwise stated, refer to annual compound rates.

Details and percentages in tables do not necessarily add up to the totals because of rounding.



Preface

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of digital transformation and added urgency for Governments to respond. A key challenge is how to govern and harness the surge in digital data for the global good. It has been estimated that global Internet traffic in 2022 will exceed all the Internet traffic up to 2016.

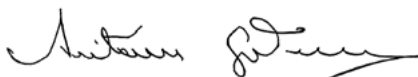
Data have become a key strategic asset for the creation of both private and social value. How these data are handled will greatly affect our ability to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Determining what is the best way forward will be difficult but necessary. Data are multidimensional, and their use has implications not just for trade and economic development but also for human rights, peace and security. Responses are also needed to mitigate the risk of abuse and misuse of data by States, non-State actors or the private sector.

Against this background, I welcome the *Digital Economy Report* of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, which examines the implications of growing cross-border data flows, especially for developing countries. It proposes to reframe and broaden the international policy debate with a view to building multilateral consensus.

It is more important than ever to embark on a new path for digital and data governance. The current fragmented data landscape risks us failing to capture value that could accrue from digital technologies and it may create more space for substantial harms related to privacy breaches, cyberattacks and other risks.

The Report calls for innovative approaches to governing data and data flows to ensure more equitable distribution of the gains from data flows while addressing risks and concerns. A holistic global policy approach has to reflect the multiple and interlinked dimensions of data and balance different interests and needs in a way that supports inclusive and sustainable development with the full involvement of countries trailing behind in digital readiness.

The United Nations offers a natural platform to advance this agenda with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. This Report offers valuable insights and analyses, and I commend it to a wide global audience as we strive to close the digital divide and ensure that no one is left behind in the fast-evolving, data-driven digital economy.



António Guterres
Secretary-General
United Nations

Foreword

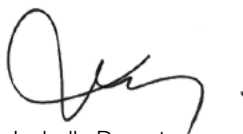
Rapid digitalization is affecting all aspects of life – including the way we interact, work, shop and receive services – as well as how value is created and exchanged. In this process, data and cross-border data flows are becoming increasingly crucial to development.

Reflecting the wide differences in the readiness to harness data that exist between and within countries, the conventional, connectivity-related digital divide is being compounded by what can be called a data-related divide. Countries with limited capacities to turn data into digital intelligence and business opportunities, and use them for economic and social development, are at a clear disadvantage.

This *Digital Economy Report 2021* points to the complexities involved in governing data and data flows across borders in ways that can bring sustainable development benefits. It also stresses that the state of the international debate on how to regulate cross-border data flows is at an impasse, and positions tend to be polarized. The current regulatory landscape is patchy, reflecting starkly different approaches adopted by different countries, with strong influences from the major economic powers.

An international framework is urgently needed to address this situation. While the Report does not provide “the solution”, its comprehensive, evidence-based analysis seeks to reframe and broaden the international policy debate. The increased interconnection and interdependence challenges in the global data economy call for moving away from the silo approach towards a more holistic, coordinated global approach. This may require new and innovative ways of global governance, as the old ways may not be well suited to respond to the new context. It may also necessitate the creation of a new international body that focuses on data-related governance, with the full involvement of developing countries and all stakeholders.

The Report reflects the commitment of UNCTAD to informing member States on how to engage in and benefit more from data and the digital economy. It will also feed into the much-needed global dialogue on how to set the rules of the game for a more inclusive outcome from digitalization. It is my hope that a holistic approach to global data governance will ultimately lead to enhanced sustainable development gains and economic benefits from the digital economy for people and businesses in countries at all levels of development.



Isabelle Durant

Acting Secretary-General

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

Acknowledgements

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