

COVID-19 AND E-COMMERCE



A GLOBAL REVIEW



UNITED NATIONS

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NOTES

Within the UNCTAD Division on Technology and Logistics, the ICT Policy Section carries out policy-oriented analytical work on the development implications of e-commerce and the digital economy. It is responsible for the preparation of the Digital Economy Report as well as thematic studies on ICT for Development. It promotes international dialogue on related issues and contributes to building the capacities of developing countries to harness the evolving digital economy.

The Section also coordinates the eTrade for all initiative (etradeforall.org), which is a collective effort to raise awareness and enhance synergies among development partners to strengthen the ability of developing countries to engage in and benefit from e-commerce and the digital economy. Gathering 32 partners, it acts as a global-helpdesk and as a catalyst of partnership. Its two main spin-offs are: 1) the eTrade Readiness Assessments that provide national basic diagnostics of the current e-commerce situation in a country, identify opportunities and challenges and provides policy recommendations; 2) the eTrade Women Initiative to empower women digital entrepreneurs in developing countries.

eTrade for all partners are also key contributors to the UNCTAD's eCommerce Weeks, the leading global and regional platforms to discuss the digital transformation associated with e-commerce and the digital economy.

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The following symbols 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;

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

PREFACE

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital transformations. Digital solutions are increasingly needed to continue some of the economic and social activities remotely. They have been critical for telemedicine, telework and online education, not least to keep alive our social ties in times of physical distancing. We have also witnessed e-commerce growth in developing countries, with long-term implications. However, unless adequately addressed, existing digital divides are likely to result in even greater inequalities.

Against this background, a group of eTrade for all partners joined forces in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, with the aim of jointly assessing how the impact of the pandemic was playing out in various regions of the world, what barriers countries and business were facing when trying to leverage digital solutions; what policy responses had been taken; and – not least important – what we could do better to reap synergies and enhance global support to those countries that are the least equipped to manage digital transformation for dealing with the pandemic and beyond.

This study on the impact of COVID-19 on e-commerce and digital trade is a collective effort, and the first research-oriented project undertaken under the eTrade for all umbrella. The work has been led by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the United Nations Regional Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, drawing also on regional reports prepared by the United Nations Economic Commission of Africa, the United Nations Commission of Europe and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. Valuable inputs and comments were also received from e-Residency of Estonia, the International Trade Centre, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the Universal Postal Union.

The critical global policy challenge that emerges from this study is that greater efforts are needed to help reduce inequalities in e-trade readiness that currently prevail amongst countries. All stakeholders – governments, businesses, consumers and international development partners – have a responsibility to ensure that e-commerce plays a positive and powerful role in national and international recovery efforts. Resources should be committed to that goal.

The pandemic has also demonstrated the importance of ensuring consistency and avoiding duplication in international efforts. Over the past four years, the eTrade for all has shown the potential for collaboration to add value, especially in LDCs. The initiative will continue to play its part by advocating relevant policy approaches, supporting assessments of national e-commerce environments, and fostering collaborations between national and international stakeholders to maximize the synergies that can contribute to enabling e-commerce for development.

Shamika N. Sirimanne

Director

Division on Technology and Logistics

UNCTAD

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Introduction



Main Messages

The digital economy and e-commerce play a growing role in efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), bringing both new opportunities and new challenges. Countries that harness the potential of e-commerce will be better placed to benefit from global markets for their goods and services in this digitalizing economy, while those that fail to do so risk falling behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated global economic development during 2020. Restrictions on movement and other interventions to protect public health have reduced economic activity in most sectors and most countries, affecting production, distribution and consumption, with greater impact in countries that were less well-prepared to deal with crisis.

The pandemic caused a sharp deceleration in economic activity for which economies were largely unprepared. One impact within this, however, has been an uptake in e-commerce resulting from the need for much activity to move online. It seems likely that the accelerated trend towards e-commerce seen during the pandemic will be sustained during recovery.

The eTrade for all initiative, established in 2016, which aims to address knowledge gaps regarding e-commerce and foster synergies among the partners, is more needed than ever in efforts to recover from the pandemic. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, UNCTAD and its 32 eTrade for all partners have played an important role in raising awareness of the opportunities and risks for e-commerce that have emerged during the crisis and have worked together to improve understanding of

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