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E-Commerce and the Digital Economy in LDCs: At Breaking Point in COVID-19 Times

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Within the UNCTAD Division on Technology and Logistics, the E-Commerce and Digital Economy Branch 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 (DER) as well as thematic studies on ICT for Development.

The Branch promotes international dialogue on issues related to ICTs for development and contributes to building developing countries' capacities to measure the information economy and to design and implement relevant policies and legal frameworks. It also monitors the global status of e-commerce legislation (UNCTAD Cyberlaw Tracker). Since 2016, the Branch has coordinated a multi-stakeholder initiative entitled eTrade for all (etradeforall.org), which aims to improve the ability of developing countries, particularly least developed countries (LDCs), to use and benefit from e-commerce. The initiative is also behind the UNCTAD eTrade Readiness Assessment and eTrade for Women (eT4w) programmes, launched respectively in 2017 and in 2019.

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.

Reference to "dollars" (US$) means United States of America dollars, unless otherwise indicated.

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

Preface

Two years have passed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the economic fall-out is still being felt all around the globe, its impacts are not fully captured. In particular, the accelerated digital transformation, with digital solutions developed and used to facilitate economic and social activities from a distance, has been accompanied by a surge in e-commerce, with potentially long-lasting effects. It has also revealed wide gaps in digital readiness, especially in the most vulnerable economies. UNCTAD's research has shown that the pandemic has further exposed gaps in policy areas central to improving digital readiness in least developed countries (LDCs).

Many LDCs are being challenged by the fast transition needed but have realized the vital importance to develop digital infrastructures and policies to support e-commerce and the digital economy, as well as the education and health sectors. Both the public and private sectors have important roles to play in creating an enabling environment for the creation of jobs through ongoing digital innovation that is changing our economies - producing new products and services for national, regional and international markets. It is now more urgent than ever to ensure that those trailing in digital readiness can catch-up. The alternative is even greater inequalities.

Digitalization is affecting all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), bringing both opportunities and challenges. With less than 10 years remaining on the 2030 timeline to achieve the Goals, the international community needs to scale up dramatically its assistance to the most vulnerable countries. The importance of digital inclusion was recently recognized by member States in the 'Bridgetown Covenant' at the occasion of UNCTAD's 15th quadrennial Conference (October 2021). They agreed for the second time to strengthen UNCTAD's work on enhancing development gains from e-commerce and the digital economy. The added urgency for Governments and the international community to respond to narrow the digital divides between countries was also recognized in the 'Zero draft of the Doha Programme of Action for LDCs for 2022-2031'[1], and in the report of the UN Secretary-General on the 'Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020'[2]. With the right set of policies and coordinated support from governments, the private sector, civil society and development partners, digitalization can lead to structural transformation and economic diversification.

This note looks at key challenges facing LDCs on their digital development path and draws from our research and technical assistance especially in the area of eTrade Readiness Assessments. It provides testimonies from the public and private sectors of smart and innovative initiatives by stakeholders in various LDCs.

UNCTAD, through its E-commerce and Digital Economy Programme, is committed to being a key partner for LDCs, including in the implementation of the upcoming LDC5 Programme of Action to be considered in 2022. I would like to thank especially our core donors, the Governments of Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, which are partnering with UNCTAD to support the digital transformation of developing countries, including LDCs. Let me also thank the eTrade for all partners who are contributing with their respective expertise in our technical cooperation work, including eTrade Readiness Assessments and the implementation of priority actions, and E-commerce Strategy development.

Shamika N. Sirimanne
Director, Division on Technology and Logistics, UNCTAD

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
ASYCUDA	UNCTAD Automated System for Customs Data
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
DDA	Doha Development Agenda
DE4A	World Bank Digital Economy for Africa Initiative Country Diagnostics
EAC	East African Community
ECDE	E-Commerce & Digital Economy Programme
ECOWAS	Economic Community of Western African States
eT Readies	eTrade Readiness Assessments
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISM	Implementation Support Mechanism
ITC	International Trade Centre
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
JSI	Joint Statement Initiative
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
PDEP	Pacific Digital Economy Programme
PIFS	Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
PPPs	Public and Private Partnerships
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
RTA	Regional Trade Agreement
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNCITRAL	United Nations Commission on International Trade Law
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

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