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Ministerial round table: Harnessing frontier technologies for shared prosperity

UNCTAD XV

Summary prepared by the UNCTAD secretariat

1. This round table addressed the following key issues: first, how fast technological change had significant potential for sustainable development, while raising important and varied concerns, including with regard to jobs, market power and new technological divides; second, the importance of forging partnerships between Governments, the private sector, academia, civil society and other stakeholders in national systems of innovation and in the ecosystem required for science, technology and innovation to support sustainable development; and third, the benefits of enhanced international collaboration, to bridge digital divides, reduce technological gaps between countries, address ethical questions and develop normative frameworks to guide a fair, transparent and accountable development of frontier technologies.
2. The panel was composed of the following: Minister of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology, Botswana; Minister of Commerce, Cambodia; Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Dominican Republic; eTrade for Women Advocate, Rwanda; and Deputy Secretary-General, UNCTAD.
3. In her opening remarks, the Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD stated that the round table would help create a common vision of the role of policy in ensuring that digital transformation delivered economic change and development outcomes that left no one behind. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, she called for discussions to reflect on policy and political messages that should emerge from the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XV) with regard to harnessing new technologies and data in ways that contributed to economic recovery and sustainable development and helped reduce inequality.
4. During the discussion, all panellists expressed concern about increasing inequalities resulting from the pandemic. They referred in particular to the unequal access to digital services, vaccines and treatments, dominated by the more developed countries. One panellist stressed that, if these trends continued, the digital divide and inequalities would continue to increase, further widening the inequality gap between nations.
5. A few panellists shared their national experiences and efforts in ensuring that digital transformation resulted in sustainable development, citing the Digital Economy and Society



Policy Framework 2021–2035 in Cambodia and Digital Agenda 2030 in the Dominican Republic.

6. All panellists stressed the importance of partnerships in developing and implementing science, technology and innovation policies. In this regard, one panellist noted that, while at the national level Governments had a lot to gain by working together with business and civil society, the international level was where long-lasting partnerships could be forged through various international mechanisms and bodies, including through the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development. Another panellist stated that greater capacity-building was needed in science, technology and innovation in developing countries. A few panellists expressed appreciation for support from UNCTAD in areas such as electronic commerce law and through the science, technology and innovation policy reviews, which had served as a basis for policy frameworks in some countries.

7. With regard to partnerships, one panellist highlighted the importance of creating effective and equitable funding mechanisms, to enable entrepreneurs to build inclusive digital ecosystems and, importantly, to make them available and accessible to women and youth, calling attention to the following key concern: of \$3 billion in funds raised for entrepreneurs in Africa, only 6 per cent had benefited women, with a high concentration of these funds in certain regions and sectors, such as financial technology. In addition, the panellists agreed that, with regard to building networks for women entrepreneurs, more could be done to enable women digital entrepreneurs to thrive.

8. In closing, the panellists agreed that the outcome of UNCTAD XV needed to be comprehensive, structured and focused on improving access to investment and supporting policy analysis and consensus-building. A few panellists stated that collaboration within and between countries should be enhanced. One panellist noted that consensus to build the proper skills and capacities in member States needed to be sought and another panellist stressed that finding effective ways and means to build a more vibrant ecosystem for digital entrepreneurs, bridging gaps in skills, funding and access to opportunities, should be further explored.
