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### Sustainable development

## Entrepreneurship for sustainable development

### Report of the Secretary-General

#### *Summary*

The present report reviews the progress made in the implementation of General Assembly resolution [77/160](#) on entrepreneurship for sustainable development since its adoption in December 2022. The report was prepared by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development with contributions from numerous United Nations entities, including regional commissions, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, the International Trade Centre, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the World Intellectual Property Organization and the World Tourism Organization.

The report provides an overview of the challenges and transformations faced by entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises due to ongoing social and economic shocks and geopolitical challenges. It identifies best practices and measures taken to support these enterprises at the national, regional and international levels. Special emphasis is placed on the need for coherent policies and consistent strategies through a multi-stakeholder approach. The report also contains a discussion of the consequences for entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises of the acceleration of digital transformation; the urgent need for energy transition; solutions to environmental and climate crises; and business development in global value chains. It also presents an overview of best practices and measures to support entrepreneurship and highlights the role of entrepreneurship in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

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\* [A/79/150](#).



## I. Introduction

1. In December 2022, the General Assembly adopted resolution [77/160](#) on entrepreneurship for sustainable development out of its recognition of the importance of entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, which, globally, represent about 90 per cent of businesses and account for over two thirds of employment.<sup>1</sup> Despite these high percentages, the productivity of such enterprises is approximately one-third that of large corporations.<sup>2</sup>

2. The Assembly recognized the important contribution made by entrepreneurship to sustainable development through the creation of jobs, the promotion of decent work, the driving of inclusive economic growth and innovation, improvements in social conditions and the addressing of economic, social and environmental challenges in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The need for a comprehensive and holistic approach to promoting entrepreneurship involving all relevant actors is stressed in the resolution, and relevant organizations and bodies of the United Nations system are called upon to further integrate entrepreneurship in its various forms into their policies, programmes and reports. The resolution remains highly relevant in guiding policy responses and measures on entrepreneurship and the development of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. The need for continued support in the development of such enterprises and start-ups is also mentioned in the Bridgetown Covenant (see [TD/541/Add.2](#), para. 127 (r)), adopted at the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

3. The present report contains an assessment of progress and recommendations for action, with a special focus on enhancing the role of entrepreneurship and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises and increasing their resilience at a time of uncertainty, crises and disruptions and in the aftermath of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Section II of the report presents an overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in a world of transformation. In section III, the need for a coherent policy response is discussed. Section IV covers concrete actions and new initiatives that have been undertaken and best practices to promote entrepreneurship. Section V is aimed at describing business development in global value chains. The report concludes with a set of suggestions for consideration.

## II. Entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in a world of transformation

4. Since 2022, the world has continued to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in a context of continuous, cascading crises and disruptions impacting most economies. The global economy has been severely hit by several significant shocks, including geopolitical tensions, rising energy and transportation costs, high inflation, disruption in supply chains and the aggravation of the effects of climate change. While entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises continue to face the above challenges in the post-pandemic era, opportunities have been created by advances in artificial intelligence and the need to accelerate energy transition and find effective and sustainable solutions to environmental and climate crises.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.ilo.org/topics/micro-small-and-medium-enterprises>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

5. During the pandemic, a number of businesses were able to benefit from support packages provided by central banks and Governments to keep economies afloat.<sup>3</sup> While the measures taken may have saved many of them from the brink of collapse, those measures have largely been discontinued.<sup>4</sup> The cost of doing business has increased, profit margins have decreased and companies continue to face challenges to their survival.<sup>5</sup> This situation is affecting small businesses, especially those that have not yet returned to pre-pandemic earnings and are more fragile.<sup>6</sup>

6. Agility and resilience have emerged as two salient characteristics that help companies to survive and sustain growth in the context of shocks, continued uncertainty,<sup>7</sup> and changes in consumer patterns towards digital commerce and sustainability. As a result of these disruptions, a focus has been placed on the capacity to adapt to a volatile business environment and embrace long-term transformation through a combination of digitalization, investment in talent and the creation of business ecosystems that can react more quickly to transformations.<sup>8,9</sup> Businesses that have integrated these elements as part of their long-term growth strategies, such as those that have adopted digital ordering, payments and financial services,<sup>10</sup> have been shown to be better positioned amid ongoing disruptions.

7. Access to finance is a crucial aspect for all businesses at all stages of their development, but it is particularly critical for the emergence of new enterprises. As a major obstacle for many aspiring entrepreneurs, it has been exacerbated by the sharp increase in borrowing costs and more restrictive lending conditions. Among early-stage and nascent companies, those with high growth potential on the basis of innovation and technology, commonly referred to as “start-ups”, require significant investment for development and expansion. Often perceived as high-risk ventures and lacking adequate guarantees, start-ups that employ innovative technologies or business models require different financing sources.<sup>11</sup> While digital banks and alternative online finance platforms are contributing to the offer of more innovative products and services useful for reaching underserved segments of entrepreneurs, robust support frameworks that include access to diversified financing are required to foster the growth of innovative start-ups.<sup>12</sup>

8. The pandemic has intensified digital transformation, leading to substantial behaviour changes and an increase in digital application usage across various domains. Digital readiness prior to the pandemic proved crucial for businesses, enhancing their resilience and ability to capitalize on digital opportunities and spurring innovation and growth. Digitalization brings intertwined benefits and risks,

<sup>3</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Financing SMEs and Entrepreneurs 2022: An OECD Scoreboard* (Paris, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, *GEM 2023/2024 Global Report: 25 Years and Growing* (London, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> OECD, *SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook 2023* (Paris, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> International Trade Centre, *Small Businesses in Fragility: From Survival to Growth* (Geneva, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, *Reducing Risks and Building Resilience of SMEs to Disasters* (Geneva, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> OECD, “Looking for the new normal 2.0” (Paris, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> OECD, *SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook 2023*.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Cull and others, “Digital payments and the COVID-19 shock: the role of preexisting conditions in banking, infrastructure, human capabilities, and digital regulation”, Policy Research Working Paper 10603 (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> World Intellectual Property Organization, “Global innovation tracker: what is the current state of innovation?” Available at [www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-2000-2023-section1-en-global-innovation-tracker-global-innovation-index-2023.pdf](http://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-2000-2023-section1-en-global-innovation-tracker-global-innovation-index-2023.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Empresas emergentes (start-ups) en América Latina y el Caribe: una primera aproximación a su identificación y características* (Santiago, 2024).

with complex trade-offs involved. While it promotes innovation and growth, it can also lead to market concentration and reduced competition.<sup>13</sup>

9. Artificial intelligence and other frontier technologies are contributing to a fast-changing environment in which enterprises need to adapt quickly in order to stay competitive. While an uneven adoption of technologies, especially of artificial intelligence, automation and robotics, has raised concerns about the disruption of jobs in all sectors,<sup>14</sup> the equitable deployment of those technologies has great potential to increase the capabilities and productivity of entrepreneurs and small businesses if they are properly supported. Consequently, realizing the full benefit requires substantial investment in technology, innovation capabilities, connectivity, skills and infrastructure across all regions.<sup>15</sup> Many advanced economies are already investing heavily in artificial intelligence development because of its potential to drive innovation at scale<sup>16</sup> and productivity growth. In some cases, this is being driven through national strategies that cover skill-building for entrepreneurs and multi-stakeholder partnerships for inclusive digital ecosystems. Developing countries lag behind in this regard and are often relegated to the role of mere data providers.<sup>17</sup>

10. Innovation is at the heart of growth-oriented businesses' operations as they strive to enhance products or production processes, explore new markets or improve organizational methods to gain a competitive advantage.<sup>18</sup> Businesses benefiting from innovation ecosystems that can effectively bridge gaps between government, the private sector, academia and research institutions through effective knowledge-sharing and networking mechanisms are able to expand regionally and globally through strategic partnerships.<sup>19</sup> Despite global economic and geopolitical uncertainties, many countries continue to maintain strong innovation ecosystems.<sup>20</sup> They are adapting their policies to foster creativity and technological advances, encouraging inclusive innovation growth, investing in education, fostering entrepreneurship, enhancing digital infrastructure and creating supportive regulatory frameworks.<sup>21</sup>

11. With the need to decarbonize industries and make them more sustainable, opportunities are arising for companies when it comes to environmentally friendly and socially responsible production systems, products and services. Environmental, social and governance considerations are driving enterprises to mainstream sustainability principles into their business models, with four out of five entrepreneurs globally currently considering social and environmental sustainability in their business decisions.<sup>22</sup>

12. Green innovation can provide developing countries with an opportunity to contribute to climate change mitigation and reduce poverty by harnessing growing technological capabilities. Supportive policy frameworks that incentivize research,

<sup>13</sup> World Bank Group, *Digital Progress and Trends Report 2023* (Washington, D.C., 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Mauro Cazzaniga and others, "Gen-AI: Artificial intelligence and the future of work", International Monetary Fund Staff Discussion Note SDN/2024/001 (Washington, D.C., 2024).

<sup>15</sup> See International Labour Organization (ILO) document GB.350/HL/1(Rev.1).

<sup>16</sup> Patent applications in the field of artificial intelligence increased by 718 per cent between 2016 and 2022, and the artificial intelligence market is expected to grow to \$191 billion by 2024. See WIPO document WIPO/IP/CONV/GE/2/22/3.

<sup>17</sup> UNCTAD, *Technology and Innovation Report 2023: Opening Green Windows* (New York, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Easwaramoorthy Rangaswamy and others, "A study on entrepreneurial innovation among entities in Singapore", *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, vol. 13, article no. 10, 5 February 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Policies to Promote Private Sector Engagement in Science, Technology and Innovation* (2024).

<sup>20</sup> Technology Executive Committee, "Good practices and lessons learned on the setup and implementation of National Systems of Innovation: Summary for policymakers" (Bonn, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> Soumitra Dutta and others, editors, *Global Innovation Index 2023: Innovation in the Face of Uncertainty*, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), (Geneva, 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, *GEM 2023/2024 Global Report*.

development and the adaptation of frontier technologies, such as renewable energy systems and sustainable agriculture, to local needs require strong public-private partnerships that can catalyse investments and drive innovation in key green sectors.<sup>23</sup> Equally important is enhancing educational and vocational training systems to equip enterprises and their workforces with the skills required to implement and manage advanced technologies.<sup>24</sup>

13. The green and digital transformations are unfolding concomitantly, and businesses need to embrace them. Many enterprises are adopting a twin transition approach whereby digitalization and sustainability are mutually reinforcing, which can unlock opportunities for technology and data in support of the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>25</sup> Digital enterprises, with their innovative business approach to ongoing social or environmental problems, have become important drivers of decarbonization across industries and have increased the inclusion of vulnerable groups and local communities in the workforce by democratizing access to digital services. Moreover, geographical barriers that once limited market reach for small businesses have been reduced. E-commerce platforms and digital technologies have made real-time global market access a reality for both consumers and producers and have increased productivity.<sup>26</sup>

14. To achieve the 2030 Agenda, including alignment with climate targets, a set of key international developments recently took place, which led to a strong push from voluntary to mandatory sustainability reporting. While international standards and policy measures related to sustainability disclosure have been focused predominantly on large corporations and financial institutions, they have also significantly altered the operational environment of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises in both developed and developing economies, due to their ever-increasing spillover effects. Governments therefore need to raise awareness, build capacity and promote standards proportional to small and medium-sized enterprises in order to ensure that such enterprises remain competitive and continue to have access to global value chains.

15. The informal sector comprises approximately 2 billion people and has continued to grow, increasing from 47 per cent of all employment in 2021 to 58 per cent in 2023.<sup>27</sup> Informal entrepreneurs have been disproportionately hit by the pandemic and have not yet been able to bounce back, in particular in developing countries with difficult economic contexts.<sup>28</sup> They are largely represented in the service sector and have little or no savings. They also suffer from limited access to social safety nets and poor access to information about government support packages for businesses. Their recovery and level of resilience could benefit greatly from governmental interventions through, inter alia, incentives for formalization through a sectoral approach, access to entrepreneurial education, financial and digital literacy training and tools, easily accessible regulatory information and business networks.

16. The decrease in the gender gap in entrepreneurship is key, as the exclusion of women from the workforce could lead to 30 per cent loss in a country's gross domestic product.<sup>29</sup> Women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to national economies and household incomes but encounter obstacles including social constraints and time

<sup>23</sup> UNCTAD, *Technology and Innovation Report 2023*.

<sup>24</sup> ILO, *Greening TVET and Skills Development: A Practical Guidance Tool* (Geneva, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> UNCTAD, "Twin transition for global value chains: green and digital", policy brief No. 111, July 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Maarten Smeets, editor, *Adapting to the Digital Trade Era: Challenges and Opportunities*, World Trade Organization (WTO) (Geneva, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024* (Geneva, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2022/2023 Global Report: Adapting to a "New Normal"* (London, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> UNCTAD, *Women in Business: Building Purpose-driven Enterprises amid Crises* (New York, 2022).

limitations due to disproportionate care and domestic responsibilities.<sup>30</sup> Barriers are often rooted in laws that restrict women’s rights, sociocultural attitudes, lack of networking opportunities and gender biases.<sup>31,32</sup> Main challenges faced by women entrepreneurs include access to funding and lack of access to skill-building programmes. Governments can promote women’s entrepreneurship by supporting their businesses at networking events, as well as through tailored educational, training and mentoring programmes, investment in the care economy, outreach on funding opportunities and addressing biases and stereotypes by raising awareness of successful female role models. The uptake of non-traditional financing from financial technology start-ups and crowdfunding platforms and the digitalization of businesses can also help to reduce the gender gap.

17. Youth unemployment remains high at an average of 13 per cent globally against 4 per cent among adults in 2023, with Africa and some parts of Asia being particularly affected.<sup>33</sup> Because of their lack of experience, credit history and connections, young entrepreneurs face specific challenges in accessing funding and market networks. An adequate regulatory system with programmes and tools that can be made available in the areas of finance and education, as well as access to innovation, research institutions, incubators and accelerators that address their needs can be a game-changer, enabling young people to create sustainable businesses.

18. During the Enterprise Ministerial Roundtable held at the UNCTAD World Investment Forum in 2023,<sup>34</sup> the above-mentioned challenges were identified, including the underdevelopment of entrepreneurial ecosystems and entrepreneurial education, difficult business environments and restricted access to finance, in particular for entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. Ministers outlined key priorities for enterprise development, including (a) formalizing microenterprises; (b) investing in key sectors to support the energy transition and reducing carbon emissions; (c) strengthening linkages between foreign investment and local economies in order to integrate micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises into global value chains; (d) maximizing the contribution of entrepreneurship to the social and economic development of young people, women and vulnerable groups; (e) creating decent and high-quality jobs; and (f) promoting social and sustainable entrepreneurship. The importance of the work carried out by UNCTAD on entrepreneurship for development was highlighted, notably its policy advice regarding national entrepreneurship strategies and its Entrepreneurship Development Programme (Empretec) and Business Facilitation Programme.

### III. Formulating and implementing coherent entrepreneurship strategies

19. A “whole of government” approach, with strong commitment at the ministerial level and coordination across ministries in partnership with the private sector and other civil society stakeholders, remains desirable when designing, implementing and

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/publication/female-entrepreneurship-resource-point-introduction-and-module-1-why-gender-matters>.

<sup>31</sup> “Women’s self-employment and entrepreneurship activities” in *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023: Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment*, OECD (OECD Publishing, Paris, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What Is Holding Us Back?* (OECD Publishing, Paris, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook*.

<sup>34</sup> The Enterprise Ministerial Roundtable was held at the World Investment Forum on 18 October 2023 in Abu Dhabi.

reviewing a national entrepreneurship strategy. Equally important is that it fit within a national economic development plan.

20. The UNCTAD Entrepreneurship Policy Framework<sup>35</sup> can provide guidance on the optimization of the regulatory environment, the enhancement of entrepreneurship education and skills development, the facilitation of technology exchange and innovation, improved access to finance and the promotion of awareness and networking.

21. The Entrepreneurship Policy Framework was recently used by Seychelles, which adopted its national entrepreneurship strategy in 2022 following support received by UNCTAD and through a process driven by a national multi-stakeholder working group. The goal of Seychelles is to create a resilient and knowledge-based entrepreneurship ecosystem that supports the needs of entrepreneurs and addresses the gaps that hinder their progress. The launch of the strategy coincided with the inauguration of the country's business and innovation incubator, demonstrating a commitment to implementing measures designed to nurture, support and scale up businesses. Angola has also benefited from UNCTAD assistance, including the Entrepreneurship Policy Framework, with the aim of diversifying its economy and making it more competitive internationally.<sup>36</sup> The Government has made significant strides in the identification and review of policy measures and priority interventions to promote entrepreneurship, which are aligned with the country's broader economic policies and focus areas such as the Angola 2050 long-term development strategy and the national development plan for the period 2023–2027.

22. To promote entrepreneurship with a high potential for growth and a strong innovation component, a new instrument, referred to as a Start-up Act, has been introduced in a number of countries. It is a regulatory framework with guidelines and incentives for entrepreneurs with innovative business models. To date, about 10 countries have adopted such an Act, the most recent of which are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Portugal and Spain.<sup>37</sup> Several Governments, in particular in Africa, are increasingly using Start-up Acts as a tool to design measures to support the establishment and growth of start-ups by providing specific incentives, simplifying bureaucratic processes and centralizing responsibilities.<sup>38</sup> Various countries have started the process towards the adoption of Start-up Acts, including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Rwanda and Togo.<sup>39</sup>

23. In 2023, Portugal adopted a Start-up Law<sup>40</sup> that defines the new legal concepts for start-ups and scale-ups and establishes a new framework for them, which includes tax incentives for research and share and stock options to stimulate start-up activity and attract talent and financing. The Law is the Government's most recent undertaking to advance entrepreneurship policy and the digitalization of businesses. It builds upon the Start-up Portugal programme, a national entrepreneurship strategy that aimed, inter alia, to attract foreign entrepreneurs and talent; to set up a national network of incubators and accelerators, a system of startup and incubation vouchers and the Fundo 200M;<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See [www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/entrepreneurship-policy-hub](http://www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/entrepreneurship-policy-hub).

<sup>36</sup> UNCTAD, "Angola: entrepreneurship strategy review" (2024).

<sup>37</sup> Innovation for Policy Foundation, *Benchmarking Small Business Acts and Startup Acts* (2023) and Act No. 21/2023 of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal, available at <https://files.diariodarepublica.pt/1s/2023/05/10100/0000200009.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> See Tom Hancock, "Policy deep dive: startup acts", Global Entrepreneurship Network, 29 September 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Innovation for Policy Foundation, *Benchmarking Small Business Acts and Startup Acts*.

<sup>40</sup> See [www.startupportugal.com/startup-status/](http://www.startupportugal.com/startup-status/).

<sup>41</sup> See [www.bpfomento.pt/pt/institucional/fundos-sob-gestao/fundo-de-coinvestimento-200m/](http://www.bpfomento.pt/pt/institucional/fundos-sob-gestao/fundo-de-coinvestimento-200m/).



and to promote co-investment with business angels and venture capital funds. As a result, the country has produced seven unicorn companies.<sup>42</sup>

24. Governments have also focused on plans to strengthen integration between policies on technology, innovation and entrepreneurship. For example, in 2023, a national innovation agenda and strategy document for the period 2023–2032<sup>43</sup> was introduced in the Philippines, which constitutes a clear effort to connect the innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems. It, together with a national entrepreneurship week, raises awareness on entrepreneurship, especially among young people, and encourages initiative and innovation. It builds upon the country’s inclusive “Filipinnovation” and entrepreneurship road map<sup>44</sup> and its Republic Act No. 11337 on innovative start-ups.<sup>45</sup> Another example can be found in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, where, in 2022, five goals were developed to speed up the digitalization of small and medium-sized enterprises, increase digital and innovation skills and the number of well-functioning online markets, build strong digital infrastructure and increase cybersecurity. The country aims to have 95 per cent of businesses digitalized by 2030;<sup>46</sup> to put in place a national multi-stakeholder technology agreement to prioritize strategic technologies that businesses can focus on; and to improve the investment climate for the development of such technologies with a view to creating more jobs and contributing to revenue creation in the future.<sup>47</sup> In Brazil, with the creation of the Ministry of Entrepreneurship, Microenterprise and Small Business in 2023<sup>48</sup> and the national policy for the development of micro- and small enterprises in April 2024,<sup>49</sup> further emphasis has been placed on the role of entrepreneurs and innovation for the country’s sustainable development. The national policy presents objectives and guidelines that are focused on environmental sustainability, positive societal impact and the implementation of innovation and technologies.

25. To facilitate the implementation of national entrepreneurship strategies, international organizations have supported Governments in promoting entrepreneurship in specific economic sectors and the inclusion of vulnerable groups, such as women, young people and migrants. For instance, with technical assistance from the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Sri Lanka launched its strategy to promote inclusive and sustainable businesses to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The strategy emphasizes collaboration between the Government and the private sector with respect to policy reforms in order to enhance inclusivity. It is focused on providing opportunities for marginalized

<sup>42</sup> See International Trade Administration, “Portugal: country commercial guide. Information and communications technology” at <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/portugal-information-and-communications-technology> (last published date, 25 January 2024). A “unicorn company” refers to a privately held start-up company valued at over \$1 billion. They are typically characterized by rapid growth that is driven by innovative business models or technologies that disrupt existing industries.

<sup>43</sup> National Innovation Council Secretariat of the Philippines, *National Innovation Agenda and Strategy Document (NIASD) 2023–2032* (Manila, 2023).

<sup>44</sup> Department of Trade and Industry of the Philippines, “The Philippine Inclusive Filipinnovation and Entrepreneurship Roadmap: Bridging the Gaps, Setting the Milestones”, policy briefs, series No. 2018-07, October 2018.

<sup>45</sup> See Republic Act No. 11337, available at [www.dict.gov.ph/ra-11337/](http://www.dict.gov.ph/ra-11337/) and its implementing rules and regulations, available at [www.ecommerce.dti.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IRR-of-RA-11337-Innovative-Startup-Act.pdf](http://www.ecommerce.dti.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IRR-of-RA-11337-Innovative-Startup-Act.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> See [www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/10/24/meer-mkbers-benutten-digitalisering-toegang-tot-gigabitinternet-verbeterd](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/10/24/meer-mkbers-benutten-digitalisering-toegang-tot-gigabitinternet-verbeterd).

<sup>47</sup> See [www.mkb.nl/nieuws/nationale-technologiestrategie-belangrijk-voor-versterken-verdienvermogen](http://www.mkb.nl/nieuws/nationale-technologiestrategie-belangrijk-voor-versterken-verdienvermogen).

<sup>48</sup> See [www.gov.br/memp/pt-br](http://www.gov.br/memp/pt-br).

<sup>49</sup> See Decree No. 11.993 of 10 April 2024, available at [www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/2024/decreto-11993-10-abril-2024-795487-publicacaooriginal-171507-pe.html](http://www2.camara.leg.br/legin/fed/decret/2024/decreto-11993-10-abril-2024-795487-publicacaooriginal-171507-pe.html).



communities and ensuring that economic benefits reach women, young people and other vulnerable populations.<sup>50</sup>

26. In Ecuador, the joint global programme of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on making migration work for sustainable development has collaborated with local governments to enhance their capacity to integrate migration issues into their development planning. The focus was on sustainable development through employment and socioeconomic inclusion. By providing capacity development on entrepreneurship and by creating online marketplaces, online municipal job banks and co-working spaces, the programme improved access to gainful employment and decent work opportunities for migrants, young people and the local community.<sup>51</sup>

27. In Senegal, the programme on making migration work for sustainable development established a coordination model that acts as a business incubator, encouraging returning migrants to invest in rural development to improve community livelihoods and empower women. The project has engaged regional, national and local authorities, civil society, institutions involved in promoting employment, the diaspora and United Nations agencies to serve local businesses. This support has increased the incomes of small-scale food producers and strengthened local food production capacity.<sup>52</sup>

28. The World Tourism Organization provided support to Chile, Colombia, Morocco, Panama and Saudi Arabia to bolster entrepreneurship strategies within the tourism sector through targeted initiatives that tackled local challenges and promoted innovation and sustainable tourism.

#### **IV. Promoting entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises for sustainable development**

29. Small businesses play a crucial role in addressing social and economic challenges within communities by staying close to customers and adapting quickly to market changes.<sup>53</sup> Many small businesses also drive innovation by developing new products and services. With their potential for high growth, productivity gains and quality employment,<sup>54</sup> small businesses are essential for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals on the ground. Supportive ecosystems are vital for optimizing the capacity of small businesses to deliver on the Goals while growing in a sustainable manner. Either alone or with support from United Nations organizations and bodies, Governments have taken concrete actions and launched new initiatives to create and scale ecosystems.

30. One such initiative is the UNCTAD Entrepreneurship Development Programme, which builds the capacities of entrepreneurs to create and grow agile and resilient businesses through competency development workshops and networking.<sup>55</sup> In 2022 and 2023, 1,650 training workshops were held in 42 developing and least developed countries, carried out by certified trainers who were themselves entrepreneurs. The

<sup>50</sup> Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka, “Strategy to promote inclusive and sustainable businesses to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka” (2024). Available at [www.sdc.gov.lk/sites/default/files/2024-02/ISB%20Strategy.pdf](http://www.sdc.gov.lk/sites/default/files/2024-02/ISB%20Strategy.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> See [www.migration4development.org/en/about/our-programmes/ecuador](http://www.migration4development.org/en/about/our-programmes/ecuador).

<sup>52</sup> See [www.migration4development.org/en/about/our-programmes/senegal](http://www.migration4development.org/en/about/our-programmes/senegal).

<sup>53</sup> UNCTAD, “The new frontier in entrepreneurship: urban expansion, an entrepreneur’s playground” (2022).

<sup>54</sup> OECD, “Measuring job creation by start-ups and young firms”, available at [www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/measuring-job-creation-by-start-ups-and-young-firms.html](http://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/measuring-job-creation-by-start-ups-and-young-firms.html).

<sup>55</sup> See [www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec](http://www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec).

Programme was recently expanded through the Square for Global Goals initiative,<sup>56</sup> a new learning and networking platform for start-up founders in which they have access to continuous support services, such as mentoring, sector-specific expertise and exchange of best practices, for the scaling of their businesses.

31. Harnessing digitalization and the transformative power of the digital economy, the International Trade Centre (ITC) supported technology ecosystems in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Mali, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia through the FastTrackTech project.<sup>57</sup> The project equipped start-ups with digital and managerial skills and facilitated business creation, growth and export with the support of local technology hubs, venture capital firms and investors.

32. To inspire and improve the skills of young entrepreneurs, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Technology Centre promoted business development services across the Arab region through numerous initiatives, including the establishment of knowledge and innovation centres as hubs of entrepreneurship, business development and scaling. ESCWA also launched the Digital Enabling Platform for the Arab Region, which provides training tools and opportunity maps for entrepreneurs, train-the-trainer workshops and regional entrepreneurship competitions<sup>58</sup> and which contributed to promoting digitalization through a second cohort of the eCommerce Acceleration Programme in December 2022.<sup>59</sup>

33. Evidence has shown that geographic clustering can be conducive to the creation of a competitive business ecosystem.<sup>60</sup> In this context, a regional platform was created by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean to create synergies and promote clusters<sup>61</sup> by supporting cluster initiatives; offering courses for cluster managers and initiative leaders; launching communities of practice to strengthen knowledge-sharing; encouraging research on frontier topics; and promoting awareness, events and joint actions such as inter-cluster activities, innovation projects and the development of work methodologies and tools.

34. Intellectual property can contribute to global sustainability efforts and is key to business development, the stimulation of innovation and facilitating access to capital.<sup>62</sup> The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) continued to assist small and medium-sized businesses and start-ups in understanding, managing and leveraging intellectual property, notably through its intellectual property diagnostics tool,<sup>63</sup> as well as through its intellectual property management clinic,<sup>64</sup> which provided personalized, one-on-one mentorship, expert advice and training. From 2022 to 2023, 14 clinics were held in 30 countries and covered a variety of sectors, including artificial intelligence, fashion, agribusiness, creative industries, furniture and technologies related to women's health care. In addition, WIPO provided support to a number of national intellectual property offices and business support institutions to expand the intellectual property ecosystem that is essential for entrepreneurs.

35. To improve access to finance, which is one of the main challenges faced by young entrepreneurs, Mauritania and Tunisia launched a project in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to support responsible agricultural investment among young agri-entrepreneurs for the

<sup>56</sup> See [www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec/square-for-global-goals](http://www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec/square-for-global-goals).

<sup>57</sup> See [www.intracen.org/our-work/projects/fast-tracking-digital-entrepreneurship-in-africa-phase-1](http://www.intracen.org/our-work/projects/fast-tracking-digital-entrepreneurship-in-africa-phase-1).

<sup>58</sup> See <https://depar.unescwa.org/>.

<sup>59</sup> See <https://coe.unescwa.org>.

<sup>60</sup> UNCTAD, "The new frontier in entrepreneurship".

<sup>61</sup> See <https://geo.cepal.org/dp-clusters/?lang=es>.

<sup>62</sup> WIPO, *Mapping Innovations: Patents and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* (2024).

<sup>63</sup> See [www.wipo.int/web/wipo-ip-diagnostics](http://www.wipo.int/web/wipo-ip-diagnostics).

<sup>64</sup> See [www.wipo.int/sme/en/ip-management-clinic.html](http://www.wipo.int/sme/en/ip-management-clinic.html).

promotion of territorial development and the strengthening of value chains. This initiative led to the creation of agribusiness accelerators for young entrepreneurs and laid the foundation for greater policy coherence among government institutions working on entrepreneurship and greater emphasis on agribusinesses in national entrepreneurial ecosystems.<sup>65</sup> UNCTAD also promotes financial access through its accounting and financial reporting guidelines for small and medium-sized enterprises (level 3 guidance), which helps small and medium-sized enterprises to produce meaningful financial statements at a reasonable cost.<sup>66</sup>

36. The Asia-Pacific Green Deal for Business, launched in 2022 by the Sustainable Business Network of ESCAP, calls for businesses to decarbonize. The Network includes a digital platform that provides corporations and small and medium-sized enterprises with a free self-assessment tool that helps businesses to evaluate their sustainability practices against set standards and frameworks. Participating businesses can achieve various levels of recognition, such as green, silver or gold badges, depending on their level of sustainability commitment and performance.<sup>67</sup> In addition, ESCAP has assisted business support organizations in promoting entrepreneurship linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, helping, for instance, the Innovation and Incubation Space of the Foreign Trade University of Viet Nam to incorporate social impact considerations into its provision of business development services.<sup>68</sup> The support provided is in line with the country's programme on support for private enterprises in sustainable business for the period 2022–2025, which seeks to promote inclusive business and circular economy-based models.

37. Several initiatives exist to support self-employed workers, whose numbers have risen since the pandemic, and address challenges related to informality. UNCTAD has developed digital information portals and single windows that enable entrepreneurs to easily register their businesses.<sup>69</sup> Beneficiary countries have witnessed increased rates of business registrations, including a 500 per cent increase in Iraq, a 31 per cent increase among women in Lesotho, a 260 per cent increase among young people in Mali. One third of registrations in Benin were among rural populations. In order to support financial inclusion and formalization, UNCTAD has also continued to offer its e-accounting tool for the generation of financial statements for micro-enterprises. This facilitates the access of such enterprises to finance and financial inclusion and keeps them in the formal economy.

38. As part of an innovative pilot study to support inclusivity and formalization through inclusive finance, Cameroon and Côte D'Ivoire have launched inclusive bonds for small enterprises and the informal sector with the support of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). The issuance benefits from a tripartite guarantee from the State, international financing institutions and beneficiaries in the informal sector. Informal associations and cooperatives that have demonstrated good operational and financial governance play a role in identifying potential beneficiaries among their members and as agents of collection for the repayment and recovery of loans.

39. Vulnerable groups have also benefited from dedicated support. In partnership with the Impact Hub Network and ESCAP, women entrepreneurs with disabilities in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal<sup>70</sup> have received access to funding and resources.

<sup>65</sup> See FAO, "FAO and the Government of Mauritania launch project to stimulate responsible investment by youth in agriculture", 8 February 2023.

<sup>66</sup> See [www.unctad.org/isar/areas-of-work](http://www.unctad.org/isar/areas-of-work).

<sup>67</sup> See [www.unescap.org/projects/gd](http://www.unescap.org/projects/gd).

<sup>68</sup> See [www.moit.gov.vn/en/news/latest-news/programme-to-support-private-firms-in-sustainable-business-development.html](http://www.moit.gov.vn/en/news/latest-news/programme-to-support-private-firms-in-sustainable-business-development.html).

<sup>69</sup> See [www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/business-facilitation](http://www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/business-facilitation).

<sup>70</sup> See <https://kathmandu.impacthub.net/designing-gender-disability-inclusive-entrepreneur-support-towards-improved-access-to-finance/>.

They have also received support in the creation of a regional community of practice to enhance the capacity of entrepreneur support organizations with expertise in disability support and inclusive finance.

40. Several initiatives and events have been held that were specifically dedicated to women's empowerment through entrepreneurship and bridging the gender divide. At the global level, the Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator,<sup>71</sup> which was established by six United Nations agencies<sup>72</sup> and a private sector company, has committed to empowering 5 million women entrepreneurs by 2030. This will be achieved through seven strategic priorities, including gender-responsive procurement, care entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs in the green economy, digital skills-building for women-led small businesses and gender-inclusive innovation. The Accelerator encompasses research, policy recommendations, networking and mentoring, advocacy and capacity-building activities, and has engaged 600,000 women entrepreneurs through 12 programmes. Moreover, the eTrade for Women Network of UNCTAD has provided regional master classes to approximately 100 women entrepreneurs in the digital domain in Francophone and English-speaking Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>73</sup>

41. The eighth edition of the Empretec Women in Business Awards was held in 2023 and celebrated the achievements of 88 finalists from 26 developing countries who have demonstrated innovation, leadership and impact with their businesses.<sup>74</sup> The Awards recognize women who have harnessed entrepreneurial skills to drive sustainable development and economic growth, thus inspiring more women to pursue entrepreneurship as a career option and spearheading cultural changes.

42. The World Tourism Organization launched the Women in Tech Start-up Competition (Middle East) to empower women entrepreneurs and promote gender equality within the tourism industry.<sup>75</sup> This was the most recent in a series of start-up competitions and challenges that it had put in place to promote sustainable tourism, including community-based tourism, green projects and technological advancements in the sector.<sup>76</sup>

43. Curricula designed for young entrepreneurs are key in reducing the risk of failure among businesses led by young people. Colombia<sup>77</sup> and Uganda<sup>78</sup> are examples of countries that have established youth start-up academies to target high-impact start-ups capable of addressing problems related to the Sustainable Development Goals, creating jobs and contributing to their societies by creating technology-based products and services. Assisted by ITC, the academies aim to incubate 900 and 1,000 young entrepreneurs and start-ups, respectively, building on international best practices while ensuring adaptation to the realities of those countries by delivering tailored support to the start-ups throughout their life cycles.

44. In 2023, the Enterprise Development Fund of IOM,<sup>79</sup> which is focused on economic infrastructure restoration and private sector revitalization, provided financing to 40 businesses owned by migrants and members of local communities.

<sup>71</sup> See [www.we-accelerate.com/](http://www.we-accelerate.com/).

<sup>72</sup> ILO, ITC, International Telecommunication Union, UNDP, the United Nations Global Compact and UN-Women.

<sup>73</sup> See [www.unctad.org/topic/ecommerce-and-digital-economy/etrade-for-women](http://www.unctad.org/topic/ecommerce-and-digital-economy/etrade-for-women).

<sup>74</sup> UNCTAD, "Women entrepreneurs take the spotlight at the World Investment Forum 2023", 19 October 2023.

<sup>75</sup> World Tourism Organization, "UN Tourism launches Women in Tech Startup Competition: Middle East", 8 May 2024.

<sup>76</sup> Since 2022, The World Tourism Organization has launched 13 targeted competitions and challenges, engaging over 10,000 participants from over 150 countries. See [www.unwto.org/startup-competition](http://www.unwto.org/startup-competition).

<sup>77</sup> See <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/colombia-youth-startup-academy>.

<sup>78</sup> See <https://hivecolab.org/about-us>.

<sup>79</sup> See <https://edf.iom.int/>.

The IOM development fund on migration priorities<sup>80</sup> supported sustainable entrepreneurship among, for example, women entrepreneurs in tourism in the Marshall Islands, by offering mentorship, capacity development and seed fund grants.<sup>81</sup> IOM also provided packages of entrepreneurship development support to migrants, including women, in Benin, Cabo Verde, Ecuador, Ghana, Paraguay, Togo, Gaziantep in Türkiye and Viet Nam.

45. With the aim of strengthening the competences of policymakers and practitioners when it comes to the challenges and benefits of integrating migrants into the workforce, a course on entrepreneurship among migrants and refugees, designed by several international organizations, continues to be offered in three languages.<sup>82</sup>

## V. Support to entrepreneurs and enterprises to increase their participation in global value chains

46. Global value chains represent more than 70 per cent of international trade.<sup>83</sup> They are relevant for a country's economic level of competitiveness and its integration in international commerce. While small businesses can benefit greatly from participating in global value chains, a favourable business ecosystem is needed. This has become even more important in an uncertain world where supply chains are being redesigned. A conducive ecosystem allows them to better access markets, talent and finance networks and to benefit from spillover effects such as new technologies, know-how, innovation and the adoption of international standards, including in the areas of environmental, social and governance considerations and women's and young people's empowerment.<sup>84,85</sup> In the absence of such an ecosystem, small businesses, in particular those located in developing countries, tend to participate in global value chains at lower rates or as low-value-added suppliers for large corporations.<sup>86</sup> The main challenges that prevents them from participating in global value chains are financial constraints and a lack of operational capabilities, managerial skills and awareness of opportunities.<sup>87</sup>

47. The emergence of sustainability disclosure standards generates, through global supply chains, spillover effects that affect micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular in developing economies, where they will have to comply in order to access international markets. In the light of the increasing demands on small and medium-sized enterprises for sustainability disclosure, and given the many challenges they face in implementing the disclosure requirements, UNCTAD provides capacity-building in sustainability reporting to its member States, concretely bringing policy advice and guidance instruments to the field, including through its regional

<sup>80</sup> See [www.iom.int/iom-development-fund](http://www.iom.int/iom-development-fund).

<sup>81</sup> IOM Development Fund, "Aō Kapijuknen, the Marshall Islands' First Women-led Tourism Programme" IOM Development Fund Newsletter, 25 October 2023. Available at [www.medium.com/iom-development-fund-newsletter/a%C5%8D-kapijuknen-the-marshall-islands-first-women-led-tourism-programme-53af49866a0f](https://www.medium.com/iom-development-fund-newsletter/a%C5%8D-kapijuknen-the-marshall-islands-first-women-led-tourism-programme-53af49866a0f).

<sup>82</sup> The workshop was designed by UNCTAD, IOM, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research on the basis of the *Policy Guide on Entrepreneurship for Migrants and Refugees* (available at [www.unctad.org/system/files/official-document/diae2018d2\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/system/files/official-document/diae2018d2_en.pdf)) elaborated by UNCTAD, IOM and UNHCR.

<sup>83</sup> See [www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/global-value-and-supply-chains.html](http://www.oecd.org/en/topics/policy-issues/global-value-and-supply-chains.html).

<sup>84</sup> OECD, *SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook 2023*.

<sup>85</sup> Research Institute for Global Value Chains at the University of International Business and Economics, Asian Development Bank, Institute of Developing Economies – Japan External Trade Organization and WTO, *Global Value Chain Development Report 2023* (2023).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Alessandro Nicita, "International supply networks: a portrait of global trade patterns in four sectors", UNCTAD working paper No. 3, March 2023.

partnerships for the promotion of sustainability reporting.<sup>88,89</sup> Those partnerships foster mutual support among countries in their efforts to develop national strategies and policies to (a) establish and/or strengthen the national infrastructure for the preparation of high-quality sustainability reports by companies; (b) increase the number of high-quality sustainability reports by companies; (c) measure the contribution of the private sector to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals; and (d) promote sustainable enterprise development.

48. It is estimated that climate-related shocks have affected 70 per cent of the global economy,<sup>90</sup> with an impact on the resilience, productivity and profitability of small businesses. Since these firms make up the majority of the economy, it is necessary to enable them to green their processes, products and services in order to secure future economic growth and decent jobs. A 2023 UNCTAD report contains a discussion on how to move from a “take-make-waste” economy and value chain to a circular economy, which requires a multi-stakeholder approach, increased finance and a change in mindset.<sup>91</sup> Efforts to promote the green transition and support smaller enterprises in that regard can be found across Africa. The United Nations Environment Programme has launched the InTex project to train small business holders in Kenya, South Africa and Tunisia to introduce circular economy principles along the textile value chain by introducing eco-innovation, a life-cycle approach and the product environmental footprint methodology.<sup>92</sup> ITC expanded its Youth Ecopreneur Programme, a global competition designed to showcase green business solutions and land restoration initiatives. It is aimed at fostering the potential of young ecopreneurs through skills-building and support for scaling their ventures.<sup>93</sup>

49. The Business Incubator and Accelerator for Mountains and Islands is an initiative hosted by FAO that is designed to enhance communities’ resilience by fostering innovative entrepreneurship in agricultural and textile value chains.<sup>94</sup> The initiative was implemented in 2023 in the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Fiji, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, Peru, the Philippines and Uganda by providing grants, technical assistance and capacity development to sustainable businesses in fragile ecosystems. It is focused on market access, the establishment of guarantee systems for organic agriculture, the upgrading of skills and the strengthening of networks. FAO has also established a regional network of incubators and accelerators through the AgriNation Start-up Cup, which is focused on improving the enabling environment for start-ups and working towards more equitable, sustainable and productive food systems.<sup>95</sup>

50. In addition to enabling access to information, networks, technology and new markets, digitalization has the potential to enhance small enterprises’ participation in sustainable value chains by helping to track the environmental and social responsibility of products and companies. To address this, the Department of

<sup>88</sup> UNCTAD, *Guidance on Core Indicators for Sustainability and SDG Impact Reporting* (Geneva, 2022).

<sup>89</sup> See [www.unctad.org/isar/areas-of-work/regional-partnership-in-latin-america](http://www.unctad.org/isar/areas-of-work/regional-partnership-in-latin-america), [www.unctad.org/isar/areas-of-work/regional-partnership-in-africa](http://www.unctad.org/isar/areas-of-work/regional-partnership-in-africa), and [www.unctad.org/news/unctad-marks-40-years-promoting-sustainability-reporting-honours-innovation](http://www.unctad.org/news/unctad-marks-40-years-promoting-sustainability-reporting-honours-innovation).

<sup>90</sup> ILO, “How MSMEs can contribute to and benefit from a just transition”, ILO policy brief, September 2022.

<sup>91</sup> UNCTAD, “The new frontier in entrepreneurship: entrepreneurs riding the wave of circularity” (Geneva, 2023).

<sup>92</sup> See [www.unep.org/intex](http://www.unep.org/intex).

<sup>93</sup> See <https://social.yecommunity.com/page/road-to-the-awards-2024>.

<sup>94</sup> See <https://www.fao.org/mountain-partnership/our-work/resource-mobilization/business-incubator-accelerator/en/>.

<sup>95</sup> See FAO Regional Office for Near East and North Africa, “FAO launches AgriNation Startup Cup for youth in agrifood systems”, 27 June 2022.



Economic and Social Affairs launched national capacity-building initiatives in Ethiopia and Sri Lanka aimed at enhancing digitalization and entrepreneurship skills among micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. Emphasis was placed on integrating e-commerce and digital marketing strategies to facilitate better participation of women and young entrepreneurs in value chains at the local, regional and global levels.<sup>96,97</sup>

51. Along with digitalization, the recent advancements in generative artificial intelligence and its broader deployment across industries can significantly enhance productivity, innovation capabilities and efficiency within global value chains.<sup>98</sup> New technologies can offer access to new markets, customers and talent and improved product customization, which can be critical for small businesses and start-ups in developing countries that are looking to grow and compete with bigger firms. Smart logistics is one of the industries that has witnessed significant growth over the past few years due to the swift adoption of e-commerce.<sup>99</sup> The transformation has generated demand for new skills and competencies so that “big data” and emerging technologies can be harnessed to streamline operations, reduce costs and enhance businesses’ competitive edge in the global market. To support smart logistics start-up founders in Saudi Arabia, and in line with the country’s Vision 2030, the Empretec programme<sup>100</sup> of UNCTAD expanded its capacity-building assistance to entrepreneurs through an inclusive programme of workshops, mentoring and study tours.

52. Special economic zones can facilitate the inclusion of small businesses in value chains. In 2023, UNCTAD, in partnership with the Africa Economic Zones Organization, published a guide for practitioners with the aim of fostering business linkages and spillover effects that can benefit smaller enterprises in and around the 240 zones in Africa through policy measures, initiatives and facilities.<sup>101</sup> Simplified economic and fiscal regimes for entrepreneurs, fiscal and non-fiscal incentives, one-stop administrative facilities, the adaptation of physical facilities for small businesses and matchmaking can help to create such an ecosystem.

53. In leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area to pursue green windows of opportunity for industrialization, ECA launched a project on fostering environmentally sound, inclusive and transformative raw materials extraction and processing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia.<sup>102</sup> The project is aimed at adding value to critical mineral resources, incentivizing local entrepreneurship and developing regional value chains for the energy transition by implementing a transboundary special economic zone between the two countries that is dedicated to the development of batteries and electric vehicles and a centre of excellence for advanced battery research.<sup>103</sup>

54. Evidence shows that women entrepreneurs face greater challenges in integrating their businesses into value chains.<sup>104</sup> Support for them remains insufficient in most

<sup>96</sup> See <https://sdgs.un.org/events/strengthening-msme-business-digitization-and-product-promotion-accelerating-progress-towards>.

<sup>97</sup> See <https://sdgs.un.org/events/strengthening-digitization-and-entrepreneurship-skills-among-micro-small-and-medium-sized>.

<sup>98</sup> United Nations Industrial Development Organization, *Empowering SMEs through 4IR Technologies* (Vienna, 2021).

<sup>99</sup> UNCTAD, *Review of Maritime Transport 2023: Towards a Green and Just Transition* (Geneva, 2023).

<sup>100</sup> See <https://www.unctad.org/topic/enterprise-development/Empretec>.

<sup>101</sup> UNCTAD, “Promoting MSME development and entrepreneurship in and around Special Economic Zones in Africa: a guide for practitioners” (Geneva, 2023).

<sup>102</sup> ECA, “ECA and Afreximbank sign Framework Agreement to establish special economic zones for the production of battery electric vehicles in DRC and Zambia”, 27 March 2023.

<sup>103</sup> ECA, “Zambia and DRC to implement an innovative transboundary battery and electric vehicle special economic zone”, 15 April 2024.

<sup>104</sup> OECD, *SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook 2023*.



economies, which affects emerging countries and rural areas in particular.<sup>105</sup> ITC, dedicated to the expansion of women's opportunities in value chains by developing skills and facilitating access to global markets, has implemented the SheTrades initiative. It has helped women farmers and women's small businesses in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in the cashew, shea and cassava value chains to develop technical and market access skills.<sup>106</sup> In South Sudan, 40 women entrepreneurs were trained in entrepreneurial skills and facilitated market linkages by participating in trade fairs.<sup>107</sup> The SheTrades accelerator programme for women entrepreneurs in the apparel, accessories and home décor sector facilitated access to global markets for 1,300 women entrepreneurs by strengthening 44 business support organizations.<sup>108</sup> In addition, the SheTrades virtual learning space is focused on skills development and offers over 100 free courses in English, French and Spanish, providing training to women in 134 countries.<sup>109</sup>

55. Gender-responsive procurement has also emerged as an effective policy instrument for integrating women entrepreneurs into value chains. Assisted by the UN-Women programme on stimulating equal opportunities for women entrepreneurs, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates promoted gender-responsive procurement as a strategic lever in accelerating access by women-led businesses to markets.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, UN-Women has undertaken a comparative review, covering 33 countries, of the current application of regulatory and policy measures that promote gender-responsive procurement,<sup>111</sup> has presented the business case for gender-responsive procurement<sup>112</sup> and has developed a guide to assist policymakers in incorporating this topic into country programming.<sup>113</sup> To complement these actions, it has developed training on procurement and investment for procurement professionals under the Women's Entrepreneurship Accelerator initiative.<sup>114</sup>

## VI. Conclusion and suggestions for consideration

56. The present report recalls the key role that entrepreneurship can play in resolving current environmental and societal challenges and its contribution to economic growth and to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In the aftermath of the pandemic, entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises continue to face multiple challenges due to recurrent shocks, sustainability imperatives, disruption in supply chains and the effects of climate change. However, rapid technological developments, the need to accelerate the energy transition and the search for solutions to environmental and climate crises create opportunities. In this context, it is of critical importance, in particular in developing countries, to continue to promote favourable business ecosystems, expand the policy toolbox and support the digital readiness of entrepreneurs and micro-, small and medium-sized

<sup>105</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, *GEM 2023/2024 Global Report*.

<sup>106</sup> See [www.shetrades.com/project-sector/agriculture](http://www.shetrades.com/project-sector/agriculture).

<sup>107</sup> See [www.shetrades.com/project-country/south-sudan](http://www.shetrades.com/project-country/south-sudan).

<sup>108</sup> See [www.intracen.org/our-work/projects/shetrades-accelerator-programme-for-women-entrepreneurs-in-the-apparel](http://www.intracen.org/our-work/projects/shetrades-accelerator-programme-for-women-entrepreneurs-in-the-apparel).

<sup>109</sup> See [www.learn.shetrades.com](http://www.learn.shetrades.com).

<sup>110</sup> UN-Women, "Stimulating opportunities for women: UN Women South Africa hosts NAMA Women Advancement high-level mission", 8 August 2022.

<sup>111</sup> UN-Women, "Legal frameworks for gender-responsive procurement: a comparative review of regulatory and policy measures and international and national legal norms" (New York, 2023).

<sup>112</sup> UN-Women, *Procurement's Strategic Value: Why Gender-Responsive Procurement Makes Business Sense* (New York, 2022).

<sup>113</sup> UN-Women, "Building gender-responsive procurement: lessons from research and practice" (New York, 2022).

<sup>114</sup> See [www.we-accelerate.com](http://www.we-accelerate.com).

enterprises. As highlighted in the report, the international community is providing significant assistance in these areas, with a special focus on vulnerable groups such as women, young people, persons with disabilities and migrants, through the streamlining of policies and regulations; entrepreneurship skills training; mentoring services; awareness-raising campaigns; virtual business network platforms and partnerships; access to finance through traditional and non-traditional finance mechanisms; and the exchange of best practices. The international community should continue to promote entrepreneurship in support of inclusivity.

57. Formalization receives specific attention, as it can accelerate resource mobilization and promote more inclusive economic growth. Business facilitation is key in formalization and benefits all firms. The report highlights the role that digital platforms can play in the process through e-government information portals and online single windows. These platforms can be developed gradually to offer further services to entrepreneurs, particularly vulnerable groups, thereby strengthening enterprise creation. Relevant organizations and bodies of the United Nations system have designed several of these tools. Their development can be further accelerated and their implementation facilitated.

58. Small and medium-sized enterprises, especially those that access international supply chains, need to be able to adopt new international standards on environmental, social and governance considerations. The drive for sustainability will affect the operations not only of large corporations, but also of micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises. Member States should consider the practical implementation aspects of sustainability reporting requirements, including the strengthening of sustainability reporting infrastructure. The international community should continue to support Member States, in particular developing countries, in building capacities for the implementation of sustainability reporting standards.

59. Green innovation has become a priority. Governments can facilitate the adoption and diffusion of frontier and digital technologies that have the potential to increase environmental efficiency and change production systems, fostering the implementation of circular solutions. The expansion of digitalization can also effectively contribute to businesses' green transition, enabling entrepreneurs to enhance environmental efficiency through the integration of new green technologies and artificial intelligence. However, this requires the implementation of appropriate policies and regulatory frameworks and a supporting infrastructure. The international community has a role to play in ensuring that all countries, and developing economies in particular, can benefit from the opportunities offered by these new technologies.