

# Annual Report 2023



The International Trade Centre is the only international agency fully dedicated to the development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) through aid for trade. Working with partners to strengthen the trade competitiveness of MSMEs, we help to build vibrant, sustainable export sectors that provide entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly for women, youth and vulnerable communities.



# Annual Report 2023



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**To access the appendices, scan the QR code or visit: [intracen.org/annual-report](https://intracen.org/annual-report).**

# Acronyms

AESR	Annual Evaluation Synthesis Report	RECP	Resource Efficiency and Circular Production
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area	REMI	Refugees Empowerment through Markets Initiative
AI	artificial intelligence	SAAVI	Strengthening the Agriculture and Agri-food Value Chain and Improving Trade Policy
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	SIDS	small island developing states
B2B	business-to-business	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
BSO	business support organization	STAP	SheTrades Accelerator Programme
CIIE	China International Import Expo	SMECO	SME Competitiveness Outlook
CO2	carbon dioxide	TPO	trade promotion organization
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa	UNCTAD	United Nations Trade and Development
COP28	2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
DEEP	Digital Export Enablement Programme	UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
D&I	diversity and inclusion	UN-OHRLLS	United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States	UN-SWAP	United Nations system-wide Action Plan
EU	European Union	WTO	World Trade Organization
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations	XB	extrabudgetary
GPG	Global Public Good		
GRASP	Growth for Rural Advancement and Sustainable Progress		
HR	human resources		
IEU	Independent Evaluation Unit		
ILO	International Labour Organization		
IOM	International Organization for Migration		
ITC	International Trade Centre		
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit		
LDC	least developed country		
LLDC	landlocked developing country		
MARKUP	Market Access Upgrade Programme		
MPTF	Multi-Partner Trust Fund		
MSMEs	micro, small and medium-sized enterprises		
NTF	Netherlands Trust Fund		
PSC	programme support cost		
RB	regular budget		

# Foreword



Amid the outbreaks of conflicts and the ever-growing havoc wrought by climate change, 2023 saw a world careening from crisis to crisis, putting the small businesses we serve on increasingly tenuous footing. Supply chain disruptions, inflationary pressures, and the long shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic have only complicated what is already a difficult situation for international trade, including for the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) that drive much of the global economy.

These crises and the resulting fragility have reinforced the challenges that MSMEs and the international community at large are facing. It's why we made fragility the theme of our flagship report, the *2023 SME Competitiveness Outlook*. Its findings are sobering, but also give crucial guidance for the future. The report sets out in no uncertain terms that we need everyone, from MSMEs to governments to international agencies, to come together to break out of the 'vicious cycle' of fragility, rather than allowing it to become further pronounced.

While the *SME Competitiveness Outlook* makes clear that there are no 'one-size-fits-all' solutions, it also finds that some key lessons do apply generally. It reinforces the urgency of tackling fragility head-on, not least given how it is jeopardizing the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ITC's projects in fragile settings, however, also give us hope: that even as crises are increasingly becoming the norm, we see daily that small businesses are at the forefront of the innovations that are helping turn things around. To ensure these innovations truly take hold, a supportive policy and business environment is critical.

ITC is preparing to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary in 2024, marking 60 years of changing trade to change lives. We are also now approaching the final years of our ITC Strategic Plan 2022-2025, which is informed and inspired by the prospect of what connected, sustainable, and inclusive trade can achieve.

The five impact areas outlined in our Strategic Plan provide the narrative red thread behind ITC's work, as well as this Annual Report. Covering sustainable and resilient value chains, inclusive trade, green trade, digital trade, and regional integration and South-South trade and investment, they map out how we are changing trade to deliver for sustainable development, especially in a context of increasing fragility. They also reflect our increasingly diverse community of funders and partners who, as ever, are critical for making our work deliver for the MSMEs we serve.

Our five impact areas are inherently interlinked, in the same spirit as the SDGs themselves and the definition of sustainable development that underpins them. Environmental sustainability is far more effective when digital connectivity is involved, while regional integration is at its best when these efforts are inclusive and support the development of resilient value chains, to name a few examples. We have seen these interlinkages in practice in our work throughout world regions, from Africa to Latin America and the Caribbean to Asia. It's why the case studies in this Annual Report, while often placed in a particular impact area section, are also achieving impact across other areas.

These case studies also show how our four 'moonshots' of digital connectivity, gender, green, and youth have evolved from initial conception to full-fledged implementation, and how we have adapted our efforts in response to fragile situations. These moonshots have served to focus our efforts towards achieving these impact areas, as we regularly take stock of how our efforts are bringing the Sustainable Development Goals closer within reach. They have also served to inspire us, especially as fragility becomes part and parcel of our daily work, and they remind us why these goals are so important for the future we want as a society.

Fragility was one recurring theme of 2023, while taking stock was another, both in the context of the





**1.** Visiting Med Foods Arusha, a small spice company in Tanzania, with co-founder Joyce Mmari **2.** Speaking with Txai Suruí, Brazilian Indigenous environmental activist, on the role of small businesses in the just transition at COP28 in Dubai **3.** SDG Digital Day at United Nations Headquarters in New York **4.** Meeting women refugees in Kenya at Nyota Farsamo, a Somali-Kenyan artisan cooperative

international community’s progress on tackling the climate crisis and on delivering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These stocktaking processes took centre stage during the first Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement, which concluded at the Twenty-eighth Conference of the Parties (COP28) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Dubai, and at the SDG Summit in September 2023 in New York, respectively.

Both stocktaking efforts showed that while valuable progress has emerged, the crises and resulting fragility of recent years have taken their toll. They also showed, however, the value of pausing and looking back at how we work, where we stand, and where we want to go next. It’s a lesson we’ve taken to heart at ITC, where we have also been undertaking a stocktaking of our own.

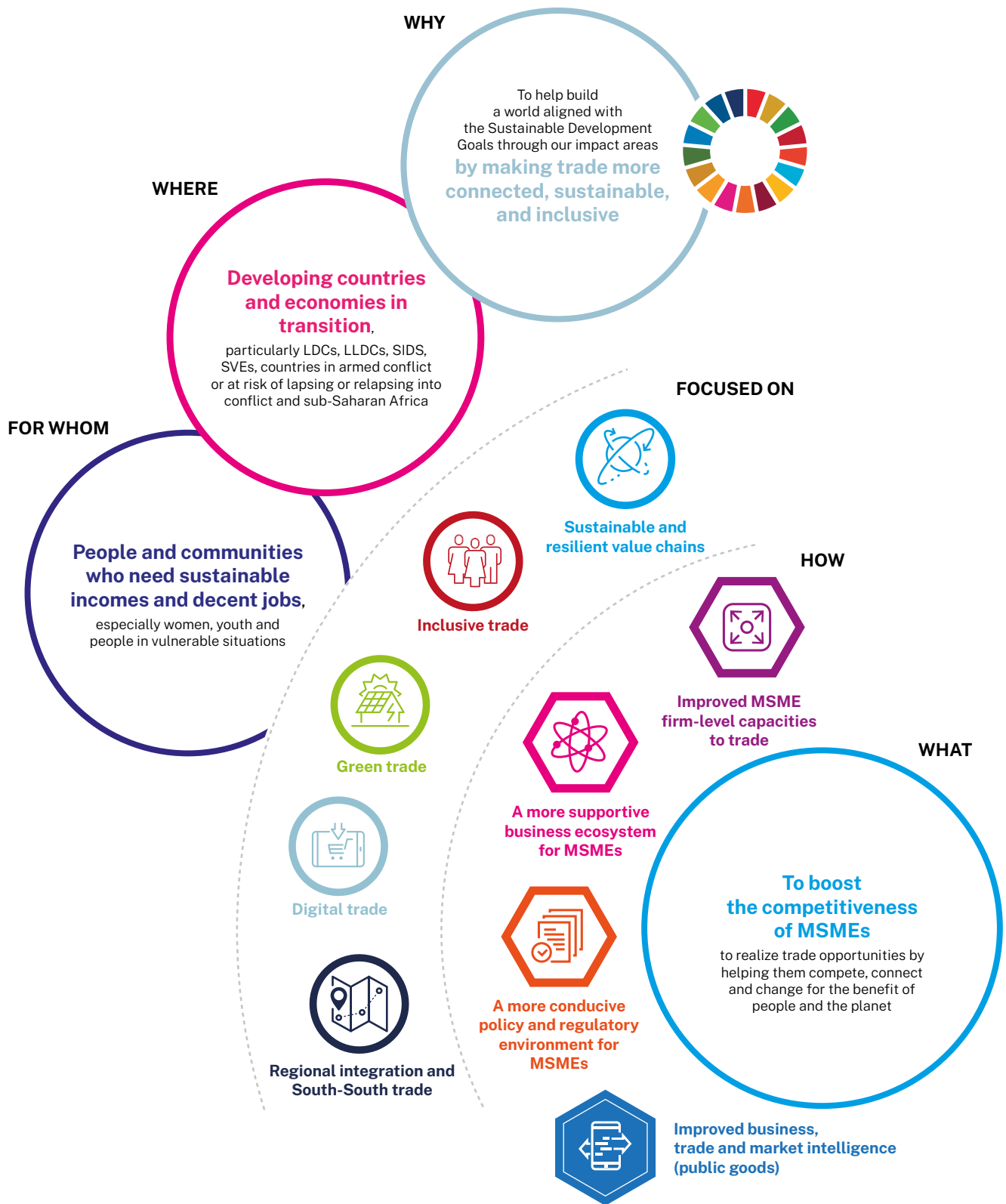
Our upcoming 60th anniversary has given us an opportunity to reflect on our evolution from a small agency focused on trade intelligence and technical assistance to a large organization with staff based internationally, an extensive portfolio of projects, and a far more comprehensive approach to trade’s role in

sustainable development. This stocktaking, however, has not been limited to our 60th anniversary, nor to this Annual Report. We have also been reflecting — and acting — to change how we work with one another for the better, as outlined in the ‘Moving Forward’ section of this document.

This Annual Report sets out some of 2023’s highlights for ITC while signalling to the work still to come, and it is informed by this ‘stocktaking’ mindset. I wish to thank our committed ITC team, both in our Geneva headquarters and throughout the world, who have worked tirelessly to support MSMEs so that they can fully benefit from what trade has to offer, and our funders and partners for making this crucial work possible.

Pamela Coke-Hamilton  
ITC Executive Director

# Our strategy at a glance: How we work



Achieving our strategy relies on tailored solutions, made possible by our core services. Our four core services are building MSME firm-level capacities to trade; achieving a more supportive business ecosystem for MSMEs; supporting a more conducive policy and regulatory environment for MSMEs; and providing improved business, trade and market intelligence through our global public goods.



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## How our projects link to the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, was adopted by UN member states in 2015. This agenda outlines an ambitious plan for how to achieve a better, fairer world — one that treats environmental, social, and economic goals as mutually supportive and intrinsically interlinked. Supporting MSME competitiveness through trade is critical for delivering on this agenda by this decade’s end.

The below highlights from ITC’s projects in 2023 give a snapshot of how our work is contributing to the SDGs, while the subsequent case studies in this report give a “deep dive” into how this approach looks in practice. These highlights are organized under the 2030 Agenda’s five pillars of people, prosperity, planet, partnerships, and peace.

### People



- WTO Members and Observers took part in workshops on how to apply a gender lens to existing WTO agreements on trade facilitation and public procurement, as well as negotiations on investment facilitation and e-commerce.
- 4,000 young agribusiness entrepreneurs in Iraq were trained through the Taadreb Platform on topics such as financial literacy and business management.
- A hospitality centre was built in Mansa Konko to provide training to youth and women in The Gambia whose livelihoods have been affected by the construction of the Senegambia Bridge.

## Prosperity



- MSMEs in the Philippines, Myanmar, Jordan, Tunisia, Kyrgyzstan and several Latin American countries built or increased their capacity for using e-commerce / digital trade channels.
- Ghanaian IT companies taking part in the NTF V programme reported 1178 full time jobs maintained at year-end, while total sales by Ghanaian beneficiaries amounted to over \$36 million.
- In Ethiopia, the total number of jobs supported through the NTF V programme was 2119, while the total sales of ITC's beneficiaries reached over \$35 million.
- Over 250 jobs were created in Eswatini within the Promoting growth through competitive alliances initiative, including in the textile, garments and coffee sectors.
- Within the Ghanaian cocoa and associated crops sector, driven by the Kuapa Kokoo Farmers Union, farmers, and MSMEs, 5334 jobs were maintained or created.
- Within the Ethiopian coffee sector, a total of 4942 jobs were created, with MSMEs and farmer cooperatives achieving over \$4 million in business transactions.

## Planet



- Over 18,000 climate actions for and by MSMEs were achieved through awareness-raising, trainings, and capacity building on green and sustainable topics.
- Over 5000 beneficiaries became more aware of diverse aspects of green growth, climate adaptation, sustainability standards, green performance, good agricultural practices and other themes, and are better prepared to use this knowledge in practice.
- GRASP in Pakistan issued a second phase of matching grants, with a cumulative 293 grants worth \$2.9 million at year's end. As of December 2023, 464 MSMEs have invested in environmentally sustainable, cleaner production technologies.
- ASEAN and Central Asian countries' policymakers have greater awareness of the European Union's green initiatives, including those affecting trade, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) scheme.



## Partnerships

- ITC's global public goods (GPGs) recorded over 1.4 million users.
- GPG users surveyed reported over \$194 million dollars of trade and investment transactions catalysed by ITC's trade intelligence tools.
- Over \$54 million of South-South investments and trade flows were achieved between African countries (Mauritius, Tanzania, Kenya and Madagascar, among others), and Chinese companies, in sectors such as agriculture (cassava, tea, meat products), and medical equipment.



## Peace

- The Government of Iraq reviewed its tariff structure and developed an initial offer on goods under its WTO accession negotiations. Its initial offer is under review for construction, distribution, environmental and telecom services sectors.
- The Building Equitable and Inclusive Transformation (BEIT): Towards Decent Work and Affordable Housing in Iraq project was launched and will be jointly executed by ITC, UN-Habitat, and ILO. It aims to generate quality jobs by enhancing the housing and construction sector.
- In South Sudan, 266 beneficiaries (including 139 women and 160 youth) have made sales of fruits and vegetables and/or their processed products, earning an estimated SSP 301,152,759 (equivalent of \$298,636).
- 185 South Sudanese producers and traders of fruits and vegetables reported that their businesses created a total of 694 jobs.
- The *SME Competitiveness Outlook 2023: Small businesses in fragility: From survival to growth* was published in November 2023 and officially launched in February 2024 in Iraq. The data collected from surveying over 1000 companies in 8 countries was used to build a novel ITC Fragility Exposure Index and link it to actual business outcomes.

# Shooting for the moon

In 2022, ITC launched four moonshots that represent our bold solutions to confront the challenges that small businesses in developing economies face when engaging in trade.

They are aligned with and informed by our 2022-2025 Strategic Plan, reflecting our current global context and the ambitious vision set out by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



## Gender Moonshot

To deliver gender-transformative interventions, grounded in women's economic empowerment



## Youth Moonshot

To put young people in the driver's seat of a sustainable and prosperous economic future



## Digital Moonshot

To enable more MSMEs to make full use of new technologies and the digital economy



## Green Moonshot

To ensure MSMEs can lead the way towards, and benefit from, a just and inclusive transition



# Our year in review: A snapshot of 2023

## January



- At Davos, ITC Executive Director speaks on how investing in new technologies, digital upskilling, green growth is critical for the AfCFTA's success

## February



- ITC, Google, International Chamber of Commerce launch Digital Export Enablement Programme for MSMEs in Southeast Asia
- ITC, Association of Producers and Exporters of Nicaragua launch local ecomConnect Hub
- ITC, Fairtrade announce plans for greater collaboration to help farmers, agricultural workers diversify and access new markets sustainably

## March



- At Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5), ITC highlights LDC Trade Tracker, food security report with UN-OHRLLS
- ITC launches SheTrades Bangladesh and SheTrades Mauritius Hubs
- Six ITC-supported African start-ups take part in Mobile World Congress in Barcelona

## April



- ITC teams up with telecom company Orange Guinée, its foundation, and national job agency AGUIPE, to hold Job Dating event for 300 Guinean youth to meet prospective employers
- ITC, Hive Colab, and Youth Startup Academy Uganda hold bootcamp to train 250 youth entrepreneurs

## May

- E-commerce platform NOVICA launches Silk Road region Artisan Empowerment Hub, Artisans Connect online store in Central Asia under ITC's Ready4Trade Central Asia project
- ITC, Absa Bank Zambia PLC announce new partnership to expand banking services to more women in Zambia



## June



- ITC takes part in 13th World Chambers Congress in Geneva, Switzerland
- ITC holds World Export Development Forum in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, including Youth Ecopreneur Awards
- ITC brings 32 MSMEs from 14 African economies to the China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo in Changsha, Hunan



## July



- ITC's Alliances for Action agribusiness team presents work on sustainable food systems at UN Food Systems Summit+2 Stocktaking Moment in Rome, Italy
- 'Alliances for a bluer, greener Caribbean (Ridge to Reef)' project wins UN SIDS Partnership Award under environmental category

## August

- G20 trade and investment ministers adopt *Jaipur Call for Action for Enhancing MSMEs' Access to Information*, encourage ITC, partners to upgrade Global Trade Helpdesk



## September



- ITC takes part in WTO Public Forum, highlighting what a just and inclusive transition means for MSMEs
- ITC holds Good Trade Summit in New York in parallel to UN General Assembly, launches call to action on 'Uniting Sustainable Actions'
- ITC, local partners launch SheTrades Hubs for Caribbean, Dominican Republic

## October



- ITC launches second phase of EU-EAC Market Access Upgrade Programme with EU, East African Community in Tanzania
- ITC takes part in second AfriCaribbean Trade and Investment Forum, held in Guyana, and brings delegation of African and Caribbean SMEs and BSOs
- At Rugby World Cup, ITC-supported businesses from Samoa, Fiji showcase products on event sidelines and make connections with UK, European buyers

## November



- ITC supports 65 MSMEs to attend China International Import Expo
- At Intra-African Trade Fair in Cairo, ITC brings two dozen MSMEs, organizes study tours, masterclasses
- Continental Network for Women's Business Associations in Africa launches
- Central Asia Gateway wins prize at UN Trade and Development's World Investment Forum
- ITC releases *SME Competitiveness Outlook* on the impact of fragility and conflict on SMEs
- Representatives from the 17 SheTrades Hubs gather in Geneva for annual meeting

## December



- At 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, ITC partners in first Trade House Pavilion and trade thematic day, brings delegation of MSMEs and BSOs
- SME Trade Academy Forum highlights role of artificial intelligence in training for development
- ITC hosts Global Refugee Forum-linked event in Geneva







# ITC interventions

# Our 2023 results



## Consensus, plans to act, policy actions

> **100 cases of trade-related policies, strategies, regulations**, introduced or changed in favour of MSMEs competitiveness, with business sector input



## Awareness

> **540,000 clients** gained greater awareness of international trade from using ITC's business, trade and market intelligence tools

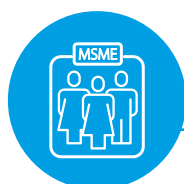
> **1.4 million registered users** of ITC's global public goods



## Knowledge, skills and capacity building

> **4800 days of trainings to over 70,000 beneficiaries**; many pursue more than one course

> **116,000 SME Trade Academy participants** of which 43% were women and 32% obtained a certificate; many pursue more than one course



## MSME action and institutional performance

> **40,000 MSMEs** either improved business operations, transacted international business or received investment, out of which 14,000 MSMEs were led by women

> **\$350 million** of new business and investment transactions by MSMEs

≈ **500 (cases of) improvements** in BSO performance

> **700,000 members** reached by client BSOs

> **75% country-level interventions** in priority countries\*

≈ **38% interventions** in least developed countries

\* Priority countries include least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), small island developing States (SIDS), small and vulnerable economies (SVEs), countries in armed conflict or at risk of (re-)lapsing into conflict and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2023, ITC was active in 144 countries.

# 2023 funders for impact areas

## Non-earmarked funders

### ITC Trust Fund Window 1 funders

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland (Iceland for inclusive trade and India for Regional integration and South-South trade and investment)

## Project-specific funders

### General (non-impact area specific)

European Union, Korea, Netherlands (the), Germany, UNDP, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the), United States of America (the), Revolving Fund MAR, Swisscontact, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), Caribbean Development Bank, UNCTAD, FAO, Enhanced Integrated Framework, Australia, Revolving Fund MLS-SCM, Revolving Fund TS, UN-OHRLLS, Japan, Chambre de commerce, d'industrie, d'agriculture et des métiers de Pointe-Noire, New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, Canada, Chile, Sweden, UNOG, Private funders, European Free Trade Association, Fundación Internacional y para Iberoamérica de Administración y Políticas Públicas, Google, Enterprise Greece, Uludag Exporters' Association, Import Promotion Desk, Futec Global, Saint Lucia Trade Export Promotion Agency (TEPA), International Organization for Standardization, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, Federation of United Arab Emirates Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Unilever, NetPC, Undercurrent News - Seafood business news and data, Switzerland Global Enterprise, Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, Economica Institute of Economic Research, AGEXPORT, United Arab Emirates

### Sustainable and resilient value chains

European Union, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the), Netherlands (the), Switzerland, Korea, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Mongolia, UNIDO, Enhanced Integrated Framework, China, Qatar Development Bank, Curaçao, International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, Federated States of Micronesia Petroleum Corporation (FSMPC), Global Coffee Platform, Italy, Finance in Motion, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI Platform), UN-OHRLLS, African Export Import Bank, United States, FEFAC, Stichting IDH Sustainable Trade Initiative, Chocolats Halba/ Coop Genossenschaft, MPTF, Shenzhen Technology University, ENI, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, International Apparel Federation, Initiative for Compliance and Sustainability, Chile, Soy Network Switzerland, Revolving Fund MAR, Syngenta Crop Protection, Unilever, Revolving Fund TS, Revolving Fund MLS-SCM, Enterprise Greece, Saint Lucia Trade Export Promotion Agency (TEPA), Switzerland Global Enterprise, Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, Economica Institute of Economic Research, AGEXPORT, United Arab Emirates, European Brands Association, UNDP, International Textile Manufacturers Federation

### Inclusive trade (women, youth, other vulnerable groups)

European Union, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the), Germany, MPTF, Korea, Belgium, Switzerland, Japan, Visa, UPS Foundation, FAO, Enhanced Integrated Framework, Sweden, TradeMark Africa, Mongolia, UNIDO, COMESA, Danish Refugee Council, International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, ENI, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, Netherlands (the), UNCTAD, China, Curaçao, Unilever, Federated States of Micronesia Petroleum Corporation (FSMPC), Revolving Fund TS, Chile, Chocolats Halba/ Coop Genossenschaft, Revolving Fund MLS-SCM, Enterprise Greece, Saint Lucia Trade Export Promotion Agency (TEPA), Switzerland Global Enterprise, Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, Economica Institute of Economic Research, AGEXPORT, United Arab Emirates, UNDP, Norwegian Refugee Council, United States of America (the)

### Green trade

European Union, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the), United States, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Korea, Mongolia, Japan, Enhanced Integrated Framework, Curaçao, Netherlands (the), ENI, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, TradeMark Africa, Global Coffee Platform, Revolving Fund TS, Finance in Motion, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI Platform), Chocolats Halba/ Coop Genossenschaft, FEFAC, Stichting IDH Sustainable Trade Initiative, Shenzhen Technology University, International Apparel Federation, Initiative for Compliance and Sustainability, Soy Network Switzerland, Revolving Fund MAR, Syngenta Crop Protection, International Textile Manufacturers Federation

### Digital trade

European Union, Netherlands (the), United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the), Switzerland, Japan, United States of America (the), Enhanced Integrated Framework, China, Visa, Germany, Alibaba Group, Italy, Curaçao, UPS Foundation, Sweden, International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation, Saint Lucia Trade Export Promotion Agency (TEPA), MPTF, UNCTAD, TradeMark Africa, Revolving Fund TS, UNDP

### Regional integration and South-South trade and investment

European Union, China, Germany, Islamic Centre for Development of Trade, COMESA, African Export Import Bank, Sweden, FAO, Japan, MPTF, UNIDO, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (the), UNCTAD, Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, Chile, Saint Lucia Trade Export Promotion Agency (TEPA), Enterprise Greece, Switzerland Global Enterprise, Austrian Federal Economic Chamber, Economica Institute of Economic Research, AGEXPORT, United Arab Emirates, Mo Ibrahim Foundation, UNDP

## CASE STUDY

## SMECO Spotlight

## Small businesses in fragile and conflict-affected settings: Breaking the vicious cycle of fragility

Iraq has a rich agricultural tradition, paired with vast cultural wealth and an impressive construction sector. Its small businesses exceed over one million and account for two-thirds of private sector jobs. But conflicts, shifting weather patterns, and other pressures have made doing business a challenging enterprise, compounding the daily pressures of finding the right buyers, sourcing key inputs, and developing the necessary skills to compete.

ITC has a long history in Iraq, and with the EU's support has put in place a project to help Iraqi farmers grow their businesses and sell their products. Known as Strengthening the Agriculture and Agri-Food Value Chain and Improving Trade Policy, or SAAVI, one of the defining features of this market-led programme involves bringing together agribusinesses under alliances, upgrading every aspect of their production processes, and connecting them to buyers such as supermarkets and processing factories, reaping prices with a 90% premium. This approach allows smallholder farmers to learn from one another and, importantly, meet market expectations.

*'As generational farmers of Ninewa, there are still many things that we did not know before joining SAAVI.'*

**Thekra Abdul Hafiz**, farmer, member of Greenland Business Alliance

One such farmer is Thekra Abdul Hafiz, who has joined the Greenland Business Alliance. 'As generational farmers of Ninewa, there are still many things that we did not know before joining SAAVI,' Thekra said, crediting

the project's focus on alliance building and buyer connections for making it possible to learn new skills and gain key business insights.

Today, tomatoes grown in Mosul can be found under the 'By Iraqi Hands' label on the shelves of major retailers like Carrefour in Erbil, and the creativity and hard work of many more small businesses can be seen at trade fairs like the Iraq National Trade Forum, which held its inaugural edition in 2022 and its second iteration in 2024.

But crises can put this hard-won progress at risk. This dynamic is not limited to Iraq: fragility is becoming increasingly common for small businesses around the world. Often, multiple crises are happening at once, putting the business and policy ecosystem under heavy strain.

Understanding the nature of fragility and what it means to 'do no harm' when supporting small businesses is a complex task. That's why the 2023 *SME Competitiveness Outlook* (SMECO), ITC's flagship publication, made fragility its guiding theme. Released ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai, and officially launched in Baghdad, SMECO outlines how a comprehensive approach that draws from the expertise of small businesses, local governments, development partners, and UN agencies can make a lasting impact on the ground.

The report takes a global look, seeing how fragility and conflict-affected settings make it harder for small, informal, and women- and youth-led MSMEs to survive, much less grow. The research also reinforces that every situation has its own nuances and complexities, and that in an increasingly fragile world, everyone involved must be ready to play the long game.



1. Farmer Field School demo site, Greenland Agribusiness Alliance, in Al Quba, Iraq 2. Beirut Erbil Company for potato products, a partner for agribusiness alliances in Iraq 3. B2B meetings at Iraq National Trade Forum 4. SME Competitiveness Outlook 2023 launch event in Switzerland

Without working to address the drivers of fragility now, progress towards achieving global goals will also falter: SMECO found that countries experiencing fragility are having a tougher time achieving most of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and collectively are behind on 15 of them.

Small business competitiveness is a critical piece of the puzzle, but MSMEs cannot break the vicious cycle of fragility alone. Changing the business and policy environment is key, and Iraq is one example where those efforts are working. The country is putting in place domestic reforms that will not only pave the way towards Iraq joining the World Trade Organization, but will also remove many of the hurdles that limit the potential of local MSMEs, including farmers like Thekra.



**LINKS**

Learn more about SAAVI: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/iraq-strengthening-the-agriculture-and-agri-food-value-chain-and-improving-trade>

Learn more about SMECO 2023: <https://intracen.org/resources/publications/sme-competitiveness-outlook>

**FUNDERS (SMECO)**

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland

**FUNDER (SAAVI)**

European Union



## Sustainable and resilient value chains

Creating the conditions for sustainable, resilient value chains to emerge is critical for MSMEs to grow their businesses, diversify their production, obtain better revenues, and take part in trade. This is even more important at a time of converging crises and increasing fragility, which can be deeply destabilizing for MSMEs and their ability to survive, much less expand and compete internationally.

That is why a critical component of ITC's work involves working across the value chains of multiple economic sectors, looking at how to ensure these empower women, youth, and vulnerable communities; can withstand shocks, such as climate change and supply chain disruptions; and lead to more, and better, jobs.

This work, as ever, is informed by both our work on the ground and our research: the *2023 SME Competitiveness Outlook* affirms that when value chains are working well, MSMEs in fragile settings can more effectively take part in trade. Moreover, having a well-functioning value chain where buyers, processors, and producers are involved can indicate to MSMEs that they will be able to operate in a relatively stable environment with fewer risks. Meanwhile, the economic opportunities afforded to MSMEs by taking part in local, regional, and global value chains can make a big difference when it comes to recovering from a fragile situation.

The case studies highlighted in this section showcase different facets of what sustainable, resilient value chains can look like: from how linking tech start-ups with agribusinesses can open up new opportunities for both, to how making the cassava value chain more inclusive of women can lead to better economic and societal outcomes.

The additional highlights outlined in this narrative overview signal towards the range of value chain-focused work that ITC has underway, along with how these also help achieve the green, gender, youth, and digital moonshots (and rely on them in turn).

### 2023 highlights

As part of ITC's work funded by the Netherlands Trust Fund V, **efforts are well underway to digitalize** the coffee value chain in Ethiopia, the cocoa value chain in Ghana, and the cashew value chain in Senegal.

By working with agribusinesses and other value chain actors to determine their specific needs, the project will pair them up with agri-tech providers who can then craft the right solutions, and in turn help meet traceability and other due diligence requirements in place in target markets.





1.



2.



3.



4.

**1.** Training Ghanaian farmers in digital methods and sustainability, in partnership with AkoFresh **2.** Women designers from the MENA region presenting their collections at Egypt Fashion Week **3.** GTEX-MENATEX applied art workshop with women artisans in Egypt **4.** Visiting Zena Exotic Fruits in Senegal under the NTF V programme

ITC's work under the **GTEX/MENATEX** project to make Egypt's textile and clothing sector more competitive, including by lowering operating costs, making production processes more sustainable, and increasing exports, continues to see results. For instance, VIVA1960, a company specializing in women's home wear, has adopted lean manufacturing and other techniques to improve quality and reduce energy consumption – saving costs, improving efficiency, and growing profits. Complying with sustainability standards is also a key part of its work, and VIVA1960 has now exported for the first time, all following ITC support.

ITC's work on regional integration and South-South trade also relies heavily on value chain development. This can be seen across a range of projects, from our efforts to support the **coconut industry in the Caribbean** to our work to build on the recommendations of the 2022 **Made by Africa** report, which identified the pharmaceuticals, baby food, cotton clothing and cars value chains as having high potential for boosting intraregional trade and creating jobs for women and youth.

## CASE STUDY

# SheTrades West Africa: Opening new opportunities for women in the cashew value chain

Women play an important role in the cashew value chain in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, but face particular hurdles that can prevent their business efforts from achieving their full potential. One big challenge is the lack of recognition of women's role in the sector, which means that there is limited awareness among extension staff at major exporters and business support organisations about their needs. As a result, extension staff may not design their services in a way that includes women producers or responds to their specific circumstances.

That is why ITC, with the support of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), has set up a SheTrades West Africa project to change mindsets, and therefore opportunities, among key actors in the cashew value chain. This project is active in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and also incorporates the shea and cassava value chains.

In Côte d'Ivoire, which leads the world in cashew production, ITC joined forces with Olam Ivoire, a subsidiary of Olam Food Ingredients (OFI), to train extension staff on what gender-sensitive approaches entail. Through this training, the goal has been to make it easier for women producers to access extension training that suits their needs, while putting them in a better position to inform where the revenue from production and trade goes.

*'As a responsible pioneer and leader in the cashew industry, our goal is to support the development of the sector in a sustainable way.'*

**Diomande Daouda**, Cashew Sustainability Manager for Côte d'Ivoire

SheTrades West Africa's work in Côte d'Ivoire includes producing gender-specific training materials on the cashew value chain. Thus far, 5000 women farmers have used the resources developed under the project or taken part in training from the extension staff, and the Olam Ivoire team reports that the support has been critical for including more women producers in their supplier base.

'As a responsible pioneer and leader in the cashew industry, our goal is to support the development of the sector in a sustainable way,' Diomande Daouda, Cashew Sustainability Manager for Côte d'Ivoire at OFI, told ITC when the partnership kicked off. 'Throughout our sourcing networks and processing facilities, we support women through literacy classes, health awareness programmes, and professional development initiatives, designed to build confidence, motivation, and financial autonomy.'

An Ivorian woman farmer told ITC that the support has changed her life, and her family's financial situation, for the better. 'Thanks to my cashew business, I can also take care of some expenditures in my house,' she said.

Similar results can be seen in Sierra Leone, where a key partner is cashew exporter Mel-O Africa. ITC's work has focused on training extension staff, while ensuring they have the resources to support women cashew producers. The training has covered gender-specific issues, along with Good Agricultural Practices (G.A.P.), and the lessons have been shared with farming households in Sierra Leone's Karene District.

This training, farmers say, is critical for boosting productivity, while making it easier for women to take part in decisions that affect them and enable a more equal division of labour between genders.



**1.** KASSEREMI company director, staff supervising sorting of roasted almonds in Côte d'Ivoire **2.** NAJMA director, staff with their almond processed products in Côte d'Ivoire **3.** Cashew woman farmer from the Barefoot Women association in Sierra Leone **4.** Woman employee at Menna Kambia cashew company breaking cashew nutshells in Sierra Leone

‘The G.A.P. training and the supply of cassava cuttings were very beneficial for me and my family because it helped me to solve most of my problems. The replanted cassava cuttings will continue to benefit us in the next coming years as I will keep replanting it yearly,’ said Aminata Fornah, who chairs a cashew growing community known as Rorenka village.

In both countries, ITC’s approach is informed by feedback from stakeholders on the ground, as well as the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic and the results of SheTrades Outlook assessments that map out the policy and business landscape for women traders.

The goal now is for participating companies and business support organisations to keep using and developing inclusive extension practices. For instance, L’Agence Nationale d’Appui au Développement Rural (ANADER) in Côte d’Ivoire has crafted a plan for its extension agents to train 3000 cashew producers, including women, as well as men and their wives, to achieve a more gender-inclusive value chain across the country.

Meanwhile, women producers who have undertaken these trainings can share lessons with others. With more women cashew producers able to earn greater revenues, many have told ITC that this money can help them build their businesses, support their communities, and fulfil personal needs such as school fees for their children.



**LINK**

Learn more about SheTrades West Africa: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/shetrades-west-africa>

**FUNDER**

Republic of Korea

## CASE STUDY

# Charting a new digital path: Tech startups, agribusinesses join forces in Ghana

Digital technologies are becoming an increasingly critical part of agribusinesses' strategies to grow and trade, especially as farmers and processors look to adapt to shifting weather patterns and prepare for natural disasters caused by climate change. Consumers and buyers are also expressing a growing interest in sustainable and better-quality food products, along with concrete proof of how these were made.

Meeting these demands and complying with the growing number of trade-related environmental regulations and sustainability standards now on offer can be a big lift for smallholder farmers and processors. But agri-tech startups are playing a big role in closing the gap, including in Ghana, where these companies are pioneering digital solutions to improve traceability along supply chains, make financing easier to obtain, and help farmers manage their daily work.

The next step is to make sure that agri-tech startups and agribusinesses have a chance to talk to each other directly, as otherwise the technological solutions available may not solve the right problems. But with many of these startups being Accra-based, they often have

limited opportunities and resources to venture out into the field and meet with agribusinesses themselves.

As part of ITC's work under the Netherlands Trust Fund (NTF) V programme, ITC has been setting up field trips between agri-tech startups, farmers, and processors, with visits involving the cocoa sector taking place in 2022 and those involving the horticulture sector in 2023. The latter included visits to see pineapple growers, ginger farms, fruit processors, and more in Kumasi.

That excursion was organized together with the Dutch Embassy in Accra, tropical seed provider EastWestSeed, and horticultural company Holland Green Tech, with the participation of the Ghana Netherlands Business and Culture Council and support from Ghana's Ministry of Food and Agriculture.

*'We joined to get firsthand information from the farmers about what the challenges are and how we can adapt this games platform to help address [them].'*

Henry Kwamena Baffoe, Managing Director, BigData Ghana





**1.** Agri-tech horticulture field trip in Ghana **2.** Technology helping control the soil temperature for tomato plant growth **3.** Field trip connecting agri-tech companies with farmers, agro-associations, agro-processors and Kwadaso Agricultural College **4.** Bringing Ghanaian tech companies and agribusinesses together for innovation

‘We joined to get firsthand information from the farmers about what the challenges are and how we can adapt this games platform to help address [them],’ said Henry Kwamena Baffoe, Managing Director of BigData Ghana. Visiting several farms helped show both their differences, but also common challenges they face like access to credit and other forms of finance. This, in turn, helped his company make the necessary tweaks to its technology.

Other tech startups have told ITC that these trips helped give context to post-harvest losses, such as the lack of cold storage solutions or poor road infrastructure. That, in turn, has helped companies like AkoFresh design refrigeration solutions to help prevent this kind of damage.

Mawuli K. Addo, who serves as the Impact Lead for the online platform Grow For Me, which specializes in areas like trading and input and commodity financing, confirmed that without these visits, it is easy to ‘miss something in the chain – from production to sourcing in the commodities.’

These trips have since set the stage for lasting relationships between the tech startups and the agribusinesses involved. Grow For Me, for instance, has now inked a Memorandum of Understanding with Ghana’s largest cocoa cooperative, KKFU, at the district level in the Ashanti region. Local buyers, who are the only ones licensed to buy cocoa beans currently, will now be able to crowdsource funding through the startup, which will also be helping with traceability and instant payments. The hope is that eventually this relationship could benefit up to 100,000 farmers across the cooperative.

Other tech startups involved in the field visits have expertise ranging from fintech to data collection, the latter of which is crucial for helping farmers and processors compile the information they need to comply with environmental regulations and standards.

The NTF V work in Ghana is not just looking at what agribusinesses and tech start-ups need, however. It also involves engaging with policymakers so they have a sense of what is needed to help the agricultural sector grow and flourish. A major component of the project involves working with the Ghana Cocoa Board, for instance, to look at how climate change, trade-related environmental regulations, and other developments are affecting cocoa producers, and how solutions like dynamic agroforestry and digital traceability systems can help. In parallel, ITC is also supporting a private-public dialogue to shape the future Startup Act of Ghana to scale the benefits of digital entrepreneurship across the country.



#### LINK

Learn more about NTF V: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/netherlands-trust-fund-phase-v-agribusiness-and-digital-technology>

#### FUNDER

The Netherlands

## From the cradle of coffee to the digital revolution: Ethiopia's next chapter

Ethiopian coffee has a long history, one that by many accounts dates back well over a millennium. Today, coffee remains a staple of daily life and of the country's economy, while the advent of digital technologies has opened a wealth of new possibilities for the country's coffee farmers. Ethiopia's economy as a whole is also increasingly moving online, but even with this development, internet access is not guaranteed for many Ethiopians, nor do connection speeds always live up to their needs.

Home to 2.2 million coffee farms, which are run primarily by smallholder farmers, one quarter of Ethiopia's export earnings come from the sector, according to the Coffee Guide. Coffee is also a popular product for local consumers. As with coffee farms around the world, however, the sector in Ethiopia is feeling the impacts of a changing climate, which is affecting crop yields and therefore livelihoods.

Today, many of Ethiopia's coffee cooperatives are looking to export to new markets. However, one of the big asks from both buyers and consumers is for proof that the coffee they purchase is produced sustainably, especially in an age where trade-related environmental regulations are on the rise.

That means many farmers not only need to upgrade their operations, both to meet demand and to ensure that they limit their environmental impact, but also so they can ensure traceability across the value chain. The latter is crucial for international buyers, who need detailed information at the household level.

The Ethiopian government has put in place a 'Digital Strategy 2025' that foregrounds the need for a 'digital transformation' to help the agricultural sector move to the next level, given its importance for helping the country achieve middle-income status in the coming years. Technology companies in Ethiopia are already developing solutions that can help meet those needs.

The challenge, however, is making sure these companies can see for themselves what coffee cooperatives are dealing with on a daily basis, and therefore design approaches that make sense. That is where ITC, with the support of the Dutch government under the Netherlands Trust Fund V, has been working to bring companies and cooperatives together.

A field trip by five tech companies to the Yirgacheffe Coffee Cooperative was a big step in making these connections possible, as was an agri-tech symposium in Addis Ababa that was put on alongside Orbit Innovation Health, which included matchmaking sessions between cooperatives and tech companies.

These initiatives are already leading to results: in the months since the field trip, the company E-tech has clinched a major deal with the Oromia Corporative Coffee Union to help them put in place systems to meet their human resources and management needs – and, in turn, help the union get back to doing what it does best.

The contract is worth nearly \$200,000 and came following extensive talks and a demo of what these systems could mean for the cooperative.



**1. & 2.** Field trip to a coffee farm in Ethiopia's Yirgacheffe district **3.** Fero cooperative in Ethiopia's Sidama Region © Sarah Charles/ITC  
**4.** Ansha Yassin Sulieman, Co-founder and Managing Director of CoQUA Trading in Ethiopia

The systems in place address a range of needs, from how to help the workforce become more efficient to how to ensure the vehicles they use for transporting their products are in the best shape. In every aspect of this work, making sure that decisions are driven by data is key, as is ensuring that the digital solutions involved fit the cooperative's daily needs.

ITC's work in Ethiopia also builds on its longstanding Alliances for Action approach, which has been adapted and deployed across world regions from Africa to the Caribbean, all under the premise that bringing farmers and cooperatives together can generate new ideas, build competitiveness, attract investment, and achieve a full-scale food systems transformation



**LINKS**

Learn more about NTF V: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/netherlands-trust-fund-phase-v-agribusiness-and-digital-technology>

Learn more about Alliances for Action: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/alliances-for-action>

**FUNDER**

The Netherlands



## Inclusive trade

Throughout the history of the multilateral trading system, it has become increasingly clear that the benefits of trade have not extended equally. The good news is that this is changing, and there is a growing awareness that unless women, youth, and vulnerable communities are in a position to establish formal businesses and trade, then the world at large will miss out not just on economic growth, but on goods and services that fully reflect diverse environmental, social, and economic needs.

This lesson is even more critical in a context of increasing fragility. The *2023 SME Competitiveness Outlook* notes, for instance, that MSMEs led by women and youth are likely to be more affected by fragility than those that are not. In the case of women, factoring in gender-based inequalities actually shows that the differing impacts of fragility on women- and men-led businesses are even more pronounced.

That's why two of ITC's moonshots — those on gender and youth — focus on inclusion. Along with dedicated programmes on women and trade, namely SheTrades, and youth and trade, projects across our impact areas are designed to inclusion as an essential precondition for trade to deliver for sustainable development.

The case studies in this section take a deep dive into what this work looks like in practice, spanning topics ranging from the transformative impact matching grants can have on women producers' business prospects to how freelancer collectives are changing the game for refugee communities. In parallel, the highlights below outline some of the other major developments from 2023

in this area within ITC's work, and how these are setting the stage for what's to come.

### 2023 highlights

ITC has a long history working towards making trade more inclusive. Its flagship programme on women and trade, the **SheTrades Initiative**, has been in operation since 2015, and five years after the first SheTrades Hub opened in Dubai to serve Middle East and North Africa, we finished 2023 with 17 SheTrades Hubs across world regions. Since then, an 18th Hub has launched in Ghana as of March 2024.

These Hubs are a testament to the power of partnerships, with their local host institutions coming together in Geneva for their **SheTrades Hubs Annual Meeting** in late 2023 to forge deeper ties and showcase their ideas to policymakers at the WTO.

Meanwhile, the new **Continental Network for Women's Business Associations in Africa** has launched, with over 150 women's business associations coming together to help shape the future of trade within the continent. Their capacity building initiatives and direct engagement with policymakers aim to help more women-led MSMEs in sectors from textiles to tourism take part in intra-African trade.

**Gender-responsive public procurement** is also playing an increasing role in our efforts to take our gender moonshot into hyperdrive. Under our SheTrades initiative, ITC has been working to support women in agricultural value chains in Ecuador and The Gambia as they compete





**1.** Women participants in SheTrades Latin America programme packaging bananas in Ecuador **2.** Teejay & Co musicians creating, rehearsing songs at Jamaica's Tuff Gong International studio **3.** Youth policy dialogue event in Iraq **4.** Training on food processing, preservation for women entrepreneurs in South Sudan

in public tenders, and has also advocated on how this is a critical issue for delivering on the SDGs at the local level – a point that our Executive Director made during the UN General Assembly Week 2023 in New York. These efforts, among others, paved the way for the launch of a new global campaign with UN Women in early 2024.

ITC's longstanding work with **refugees and host communities**, is continuing under the Refugees Empowerment through Markets (REMI) initiative, while ITC is also supporting **internally displaced persons** in Ukraine, to name two of the examples profiled in this year's Annual Report. Looking to the future, ITC is preparing to launch a pilot project on Indigenous Peoples and trade in Ecuador and will be integrating a disability marker into ITC's projects, the latter of which is described further in the section on 'Advancing Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity' of this report.

Our work on **youth** includes many country-specific projects, such as our work in Iraq, where we partner with the Norwegian Refugee Council to produce a **Youth Entrepreneurship Barometer** survey, as well

as supporting youth as they increasingly take part in the agriculture and agri-food value chains. Our work in **South Sudan**, meanwhile, targets greater opportunities for youth and women in the fruits and vegetables value chains.

Looking to the future, ITC is building on its longstanding work to support more young people in the **creative industries and sport sectors**, including by deepening our relationship with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). Our **Youth Ecopreneur Awards** are another example of why inclusion is key for sustainability: the awards show how empowering youth entrepreneurs opens the door to innovative approaches to tackle environmental issues. That is why this case study is not under the 'inclusive trade' section, but is listed as a 'green trade' story, as it typifies how ITC's moonshots are cross-cutting by nature: if one wins, so do the others.

## CASE STUDY

# A business ecosystem fit for women's empowerment: The SheTrades Accelerator Programme

Business support organizations (BSOs) provide small businesses with essential resources to grow, compete, and export. By improving the nature and quality of their outreach and services to women-led businesses, this can lead to business ecosystems that work for women's entrepreneurship, both at scale and in a sustainable way.

Since late 2021, the SheTrades Accelerator Programme, or STAP, has supported women-led businesses in the fast-growing fashion, accessories, and home décor sectors, along with the BSOs that these businesses rely on. The programme is active across Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Senegal, and South Africa, with components that both recognize the shared challenges of women entrepreneurs in these countries, like gender bias or access to finance, while accounting for their different contexts and nuances.

To date, the program has served over 45 business support organizations and 440 women-led enterprises, thanks to the generous support of Germany's Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). One of the programme's big wins is that these BSOs now have a clearer understanding of where they need to adapt their services to account for their potential impacts on gender equality, and how.

One of the highlights in 2023, for instance, was a masterclass where 17 BSOs were guided on how to use the ITC Benchmarking Self-Assessment tool. A key aspect of this assessment was to evaluate the BSOs' efforts and practices in advancing women's empowerment and identifying areas for improvement. Based on the results of the self-assessment, each BSO

received coaching so it could develop an action plan featuring specific objectives to improve its support to women-led businesses, while taking into account its respective capabilities, resources, needs, and priorities.

Additionally, participants benefited from in-person workshops aimed at addressing common weaknesses among the BSO group and engaged in peer-to-peer learning by sharing and learning from each other on gender responsive services and best practices.

Lynda Koske, Senior Product Development Officer at the Kenya Export Promotion and Branding Agency, told ITC that the training organizations like hers had received 'has been very beneficial,' crediting it for helping her team craft customized support for women-led businesses.

Under the programme, BSOs have also received sector-specific 'training of trainers' classes and have reported that they are better equipped to apply a gender lens to their skills-building programs for small businesses.

Other examples of STAP in action include sector-specific trainings in English, Arabic, and Kurdish for young women entrepreneurs in Iraq and Jordan, giving them the chance to hone their business and entrepreneurial skills, develop strategies for accessing international markets, and design and develop their businesses further.

One of the programme's foundational components is collaboration: not only does the STAP link up with other ITC programmes and projects, such as those devoted to youth and supporting Iraqi agribusinesses, respectively, but it also relies on partnerships with governments



**1.** Woman designer exhibiting at Ripe Market trade show in Dubai **2.** SheTrades Accelerator, Garment Design & Training Services Center workshop in Jordan **3. & 4.** SheTrades Accelerator workshop in Kenya

and other UN agencies, such as the International Organization for Migration or the International Telecommunication Union. The Iraq-based Station Foundation for Entrepreneurship and Jordan’s Garment Design & Training Services Centre have also played key roles in the project’s execution.

This collaboration is necessary so that the support BSOs and women-led businesses receive under the STAP account for the context in which beneficiaries live and work.

BSOs and entrepreneurs from the programme are now part of the ITC SheTrades.com online network, where they can continue accessing capacity-building and networking opportunities. BSOs from the programme have also joined ITC’s BSO Directory, which features over 600 BSOs from over 150 countries. The programme is also responsible for connecting participating

entrepreneurs to BSOs and, where applicable, SheTrades Hubs in Kenya and South Africa to ensure support can be sustained after the programme’s conclusion.



**LINK**

Learn more about the SheTrades Accelerator Programme: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/shetrades-accelerator-programme-for-women-entrepreneurs-in-the-apparel>

**FUNDER**

Germany

## CASE STUDY

## Achieving global reach for refugee entrepreneurs: A Dadaab story

In Kenya's Garissa County, the Dadaab refugee complex has long hosted refugees from other countries in the region, particularly from Somalia but also from Ethiopia, South Sudan, and several others. In place for over three decades, the complex now has three main camps in operation. Some people have spent their entire lives in the Dadaab complex.

For the people living in Dadaab, finding sources of income can be particularly complex. Refugees, for instance, may run into difficulties accessing consistent electricity or internet sources in their camps, or may lack identification cards that employers, including freelancer websites, may require.

That is why ITC has had an active presence in the area for several years, including under its Refugees Empowerment Through Markets Initiative (REMI). This project involves refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returning migrants, local communities, and their businesses. It is also informed by ITC's extensive

research on what it means to support MSMEs in fragile and conflict-affected settings. (For more on fragility, see the related case study on SMECO and SAAVI.)

One of the organizations that ITC works with in Dadaab is Nyota Farsamo Artisanal Collective, a Somali-Kenyan artisan collective which is helping make it possible for more women refugees to start and build their businesses. They focus particularly on handicrafts and provide women with support to strengthen their entrepreneurship skills. They are also responsible for creating a network among these women-led businesses.

ITC has worked with Nyota Farsamo over several years, even before the launch of REMI, thanks to the support of the European Union under projects such as the Area Based Livelihoods Initiative–Garissa (ABLI-G), and also via other multi-funder projects such as the Refugee Employment and Skills Initiative (RESI), supported by Japan, the EU, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Danish Refugee Council. One of the recent milestones for





1. Women refugees making baskets for the Nyota Farsamo collective 2. Nyota Farsamo’s Goodie Odhiambo supports women refugees as they make handcrafts in line with market tastes and trends 3. & 4. Digital trade and skills workshop for refugees in Kenya

Nyota Farsamo came in 2023, when they began a collaboration that will allow them to join the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) MADE51 initiative in 2024. That initiative now spans 23 countries and counting.

‘By now Dadaab has second, even third generations of displaced persons, and it is not clear for them if there is a chance to go back,’ Athir Hajir Adbi, Nyota Farsamo’s chair, told ITC’s *Trade Forum* magazine. ‘Our collective also stands for support and belonging in a home away from home. With a little money in their pockets, women are empowered to leave abusive relationships, or buy basic needs such as water, food, and clothes — so the economic effect trickles down to leading a dignified life as a human being.’

Being part of MADE51 means accessing social enterprise partners from across world regions, along with opportunities for seed funding and other resources. It also means that artisans can access new buyers for their products, drawing on the strong reputation that the initiative has built since its inception. The Nyota Farsamo collective is now looking to build on this success to set up market outlets in Dadaab, Garissa, and Nairobi.

Nyota Farsamo is one of many such stories of collectives that ITC and its partners are working with, and as ITC works in more fragile and conflict-affected settings, it is engaging closely with partners in the humanitarian and development space to ensure that every intervention is tailored to a given situation’s nuances. That includes, as the situation requires, undertaking conflict-sensitivity assessments and other analyses. ITC is currently developing guidelines for these assessments.

ITC has also made pledges under the Global Refugee Compact in both 2019 and 2023, outlining its plans for scaling up its work, and co-hosted a Global Refugee Forum-linked event in December 2023.

*‘Our collective also stands for support and belonging in a home away from home.’*

**Athir Hajir Adbi**, Chair of Nyota Farsamo

The most recent pledges feature a commitment to continue taking a partnership-driven approach, connecting the private sector and humanitarian initiatives, to tackle challenges refugees face when participating in the local and global economy. Over time, these efforts will not just change the economic possibilities for refugees themselves, but also change the wider business and policy ecosystem accordingly.



**LINK**

Learn more about REMI: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/refugees-empowerment-through-markets-initiative-remi>

**FUNDERS (REMI)**

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland

## CASE STUDY

## Grasping new opportunities in Pakistan: What matching grants mean for women-led agribusinesses

Pakistan's agricultural sector is a major driver of the country's economy, responsible for roughly 20% of the country's gross domestic product and around 4 out of every 10 jobs. It is also an important sector for women, but those who do work in livestock or horticulture often face particular hurdles to starting or running a business, such as their ability to access land and credit.

One of these agribusinesses is led by Shazia Mateen, who produces and trades mangoes that are sourced from farmers in Pakistan's Sindh and Punjab provinces. She is responsible for 300 employees and has become a trained chartered accountant to put her company in a better position.

Shazia's business is known for more than just mangoes: her company, known as Rishad Mateen and Co., also exports mandarin oranges, onions, and potatoes. She told ITC that she hopes her successes will make it possible for more women to become entrepreneurs, especially in the agricultural sector.

'Being a woman entrepreneur, I have to put 100% more effort to be taken seriously,' Shazia told ITC. 'It took me seven years to convince people that I am the decision maker. However, times are changing, and the industry is developing. The better work I do, more avenues will open for other women.'

*'Times are changing, and the industry is developing. The better work I do, more avenues will open for other women.'*

**Shazia Mateen**, CEO, Rishad Mateen and Co.

ITC's Growth for Rural Advancement and Sustainable Progress, or GRASP, project was set up in 2019, and is active primarily in the Sindh and Balochistan provinces. Its focus is on supporting Pakistan's rural agribusinesses in the horticulture and livestock sectors as they adapt to the threats posed by climate change and global economic uncertainty, helping them become more competitive while ensuring these efforts open more employment opportunities for women.

Funded by the European Union, one of GRASP's key components involves helping agribusinesses like Shazia's obtain matching grants to help grow their businesses and export. The 30 million PKR (approximately \$107,000) grant that Shazia received, for instance, will enable her to build a new plant at her mango warehouse to help grade and sort mangoes, along with a cold storage unit to store 250 to 300 tonnes of fruits and vegetables. For mangoes and bananas, that means a longer shelf life by approximately two months, which is critical for her exports.

She now plans on exporting bananas to Europe — a notable development, given that only recently Pakistan still needed to import bananas from its neighbours to meet local demand. Shazia's story is one of many examples of what the GRASP project looks like in action. For instance, ITC has worked to support more women entrepreneurs like Shazia through SheTrades Gender Training workshops, set up by ITC's flagship programme on women and trade.

Another big component of GRASP is helping make it easier for agribusinesses to incorporate new technologies into how they work, including climate-smart technologies, while supporting tech startups



**1.** Mango cleaning process **2.** Mango packaging **3.** Rishad Mateen and Co.'s stand at Pakistan's first International Food & Agriculture Exhibition **4.** Guest receiving a box of mangoes from Shazia Mateen, Chief Executive Officer at Rishad Mateen and Co.

that are key for making this happen. That's why ITC has also put in place an agri-tech incubator programme for entrepreneurs and business support organizations, providing them with training, individualized coaching, networking opportunities, and other resources. This incubator support is invaluable for agri-tech startups as they are getting off the ground.

'Agri-tech is a new field for me, and I am now aware of the overall agri-tech global and national trends,' Muhammad Shah Khan, Project Director at the National Incubator Center Quetta, told ITC. Thanks to this training, which he has shared with his team, his organization's can now develop more comprehensive business strategies, accounting for its strengths and where it needs to improve, and in turn develop services that better suit its clients' needs.

Looking ahead, GRASP will continue its efforts to support Pakistani SMEs in the agriculture and horticulture sectors, including by connecting them

with policymakers. The objective is to have more success stories like Shazia's, which show how being able to grow and trade can play an important role in supporting goals like gender equality and food security.



**LINK**

Learn more about GRASP in Pakistan: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/pakistan-growth-for-rural-advancement-and-sustainable-progress-grasp>

**FUNDER**

European Union



## Green trade

The nexus between trade and environment gained even greater prominence in 2023, a year that was notable not only for marking the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but also for concluding the first Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement. MSMEs are crucial for delivering on both, given that they account for two-thirds of jobs and over 90% of businesses globally.

The *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition* affirmed that on 80% of the 169 targets set out under the 17 SDGs, progress is either poor or has backtracked, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres warning that ‘Unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda will become an epitaph for a world that might have been.’ Similarly dire warnings came from the Global Stocktake. Meanwhile, crises around the world have meant that more MSMEs are operating in fragile settings, while those countries affected by fragility are more likely to be behind on achieving the SDGs. Climate change and environmental degradation are major factors behind this fragility.

ITC’s green moonshot is a major push to turn this situation around. It prioritizes enabling MSMEs to adopt more sustainable practices, while making sure policymakers hear directly from MSMEs and BSOs about their needs and circumstances. The green moonshot therefore aims to help close the gap when it comes to achieving the environmental goals and targets set out under the SDGs – and to do so in a way that keeps MSMEs connected to global supply chains.

The case studies in this section showcase a spectrum of what’s possible when green trade is brought to the

forefront, from the national level in Nepal and Jamaica to the international level with youth ecopreneurs. The additional highlights in this narrative summary demonstrate some of the major developments on the international scene on trade’s role in tackling environmental challenges, and what ITC is doing to help.

### 2023 highlights

At the international level, and in a notable first, trade was the subject of a full thematic day under the **COP28 presidency**. ITC partnered with the WTO, UNCTAD, and the ICC to host a Trade House Pavilion at the conference. ITC also made a submission to the Work Programme on Just Transition Pathways, while bringing a delegation of MSMEs and BSOs to the COP so they could share their experiences with climate change and the green transition with UNFCCC negotiators.

COP28 also featured the launch of ITC’s **Green Performance Toolkit**, an online platform designed to help MSMEs in the apparel/textiles and agro-processing sectors assess their environmental performance. It answers a particular need identified through the ITC Resource Efficiency and Circular Production coaching methodology with over 250 MSMEs from 15 countries: namely, how to collect the right data on environmental sustainability. The toolkit came together following extensive preparations, including piloting its features with MSMEs that ITC was working with under various projects. With MSMEs taking part from Bangladesh, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, and St. Lucia, the toolkit has incorporated user feedback from its earliest iterations.





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1. Shell of Coffee Seeds Natural Process coffee beans © Shutterstock.com 2. SME Trade Academy online courses platform 3. Emi-Beth, Ghanaian woman entrepreneur, uses coffee's silverskin in cosmetics

Trade-related environmental regulations and sustainability standards are becoming increasingly common, as governments look to tackle environmental and social ills. To help MSMEs, BSOs, standards bodies, and policymakers adapt, and to do so in a way that ensures MSMEs can remain connected to global supply chains, ITC has been working on solutions drawing on evidence and information gathered from **roundtables on deforestation-free global value chains**.

These roundtables bring together representatives from producing countries, the EU, small businesses, and private sector initiatives, with the goal of finding solutions together. ITC is working on training producers on sustainable techniques, providing market research and analysis on the impacts of these regulations, and preparing a 'deforestation-free trade gateway' building on ITC's suite of online tools, which will provide a space for sharing information and best practices.

Together with the International Coffee Organization (ICO), Giuseppe e Pericle Lavazza Foundation, Politecnico di Torino, the University of Gastronomic Sciences

in Pollenzo, Italy, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), ITC launched the **Centre for Circular Economy in Coffee** in September. The centre will work with players across the coffee value chain and ecosystem as they test out ways to make the circular economy a reality within the sector. It builds on longstanding efforts underway under the ITC Coffee Guide and related network to bring together players in the coffee sector to craft solutions to shared challenges.

The **SME Trade Academy's** online trainings also have a strong environmental component, with a dedicated stream of courses on sustainability for MSMEs. In 2023, its sustainability-focused courses covered topics such as climate risk management in the agri-food sector, organic farming techniques, and how to commercialize botanical products in the European Union. The risk management course alone attracted 674 participants, with 167 receiving certificates at the end. The organic farming course was similarly popular, with 745 participants, out of which 155 were issued certificates.

## CASE STUDY

## Coconuts in the Caribbean: Building resilience through partnerships

Resilience has become a watchword for the Caribbean, whose small businesses have faced off against the COVID-19 pandemic, droughts, supply chain disruptions, rising costs, and a global backdrop of inflation. Home to many small island developing states (SIDS), the region is particularly exposed and vulnerable to these pressures.

For over a decade, ITC has teamed up with local and regional agencies and international partners, aiming to help smallholder farmers and MSMEs become better equipped to withstand these crises. In practice, that means building the region's environmental and economic resilience, increasing food security, decreasing dependence on imports, and diversifying risks and opportunities.

Critical for these efforts is the need to factor in each island's ecosystem as a whole. A project known as Alliances for Coconut Industry Development for the Caribbean aims to do just that and is built around a novel idea: that by convening smallholder farmers, MSMEs, institutions and buyers into alliances, not only will the coconut industry grow and thrive, but a bluer, greener

Caribbean will emerge as a result. In other words, these alliances are showing that environmental stewardship can and should go hand in hand with sustainable production and trade.

The alliance approach comes from ITC's longstanding Alliances for Action model, which is based on the premise that the best innovations come from the ground up. Participating farmers have set up diversified plots, while adopting climate-smart agricultural practices. They have also planted other crops, like scotch bonnet peppers and plantains, alongside coconuts, in a practice known as intercropping, which is key for soil health, productivity, incomes and resilience.

The project has already helped 5,000 smallholder farmers and other businesses, either through direct support or knowledge-sharing between targeted communities. Participating MSMEs say that these efforts have been critical for sharing their products and the stories behind them with new markets.

In the case of Jamaica, the project's partners include the Alligator Head Foundation, Jamaica's Coconut





1. Farmers growing coconut trees in Jamaica 2. & 3. Staff from BabyLove, a coconut ice cream company in Jamaica 4. Scientific Research Council supports Jamaican farmers, producers to create value-added products

Industry Board, the Jamaican Ministry of Agriculture, the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute, the Rural Agricultural Development Authority, and key processors and buyers. Funding and support come from the European Union and the Caribbean Forum (CARIFORUM).

One of the project’s innovations has been to work from ‘ridge to reef’ to include coastal communities active in both farming and fishing. Jamaica’s Portland parish is home to fishing communities that are famed for their use of artisanal methods, honed over generations. However, environmental threats have put these fisheries, farms and the jobs that depend on them under threat.

The Alligator Head Foundation is a Jamaican non-profit organization that helps manage a marine protected area in East Portland, currently closed to fishing. The foundation helps coastal communities, including fishers and farmers, develop new income sources, from ecotourism to farming to processing coconuts and their by-products.

*‘This partnership brings a green dimension into our blue economy work.’*

**Nickie Myers**, Director, Alligator Head Foundation

‘Our mission is that we work for fish-filled seas, healthy reefs, and thriving communities,’ said Nickie Myers, Director of the Alligator Head Foundation. ‘This partnership brings a green dimension into our blue economy work, by developing climate-smart agriculture that helps boost our coconut sector and provide crucial tools to our farmers so they can build sustainable livelihoods.’

Together with ITC and the Coconut Industry Board, the foundation has been expanding their climate-smart agriculture programme to protect land and sea, and support farmer and fisher communities resulting in higher incomes, greater resilience to climate impacts, and improved food security. These efforts led the initiative to win the United Nations’ Small Island Developing States Partnerships Award in the environmental category in 2023.

Looking ahead, partners will take this alliance approach and apply it to other countries in the region, as part of their efforts to help reduce the Caribbean’s food import bill and tackle food insecurity.

Lessons learned will be channelled into an upcoming ITC project on improving regional food security, launched in time for the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in Antigua and Barbuda in 2024.



**LINK**

Learn more about Alliances for Coconut Industry Development for the Caribbean: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/caribbean-development-of-value-added-products-and-intra-regional-trade-to-enhance>

**FUNDER**

European Union

## CASE STUDY

# Financing the green transition: Changing the game for Nepali agribusinesses

Six out of every ten Nepalis work in the agricultural sector, growing products from cardamom to coffee to tea. Their efforts are playing a major role in the South Asian nation's economy, bringing in one-quarter of its gross domestic product.

Historically, however, Nepal's smaller businesses, especially those working in agroprocessing, have faced a tough road when it comes to getting the finance they need to grow, including for adopting greener production practices. Even directives from Nepal's central bank that require commercial banks to grant 15% of all loans to commercial farms by end-2023 have not translated to better financing for smaller processors in practice.

To help change the game for Nepal's agribusinesses, ITC worked with local institutions to set up a GreenToCompete Hub, which is a model that ITC has deployed in several countries and regions around the world to help support MSMEs as they undertake the green transition.

The Nepal-based Hub is hosted by the Agro Enterprise Center (AEC) the agricultural wing of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI), and the Hub has now been in place since 2019. It has paired up with the NMB Bank to help make MSMEs' financing dreams a reality – and thus far, the bank has already mobilized Nrs. 120 million, or \$902,620 for 25 agribusinesses under this model. Following the success of this loan model, other Nepali banks have taken the initiative to replicate it.

The Hub's role extends beyond just making connections between MSMEs and financial providers: it also helps

small producers learn about the stock-in-trade of applying for loans and other financial support, from what documents they need to how they can make the best case for support and plan the financial aspects of their businesses.

The loans themselves aim at increasing sustainable agricultural production, meaning that the loans will support agro-processors who need to undergo certification and audits for compliance with voluntary sustainability standards. The Hub coaches MSMEs so they are well-positioned to undertake these steps, including by developing a sustainability strategy. That, in turn, leads to them being able to produce higher quality products, which command better prices on the market.

Another big win is that participating agribusinesses are building deeper relationships with one another, and in turn are learning from the practices that each one has developed to run their businesses and make them more environmentally sustainable.

The extensive reach and impact this Hub has achieved in just a few years of operation has led to public recognition at major international conferences, including at the UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai. At COP28, Dinesh Prasad Parajuli, the Agro Enterprise Center's (former) CEO, joined the ITC delegation to share the Hub's successes thus far and where they plan to go next.

D.B. Basnet, the new Chairman of the Agro Enterprise Center, told ITC that the Hub's results have been 'inspiring,' and hopes that the success thus far continues to deliver for more small agribusinesses.



**1.** Nepali women farmers from Ajirkot Gorkha Central Coffee Cooperative harvesting coffee © Laxmi Prasad Ngakhushi/ITC **2.** Sushil Acharya, founder of MountBrew Coffee in Nepal **3.** Nepali farmers in Dhankuta District practicing sustainable techniques to make Arabica coffee © Laxmi Prasad Ngakhushi/IT **4.** Farmers drying coffee beans at Nepal Coffee Company Nuwakot © Laxmi Prasad Ngakhushi/ITC

*‘The effort has translated into increased access to crucial financial resources, improved market linkages, and enhanced sustainability practices.’*

**D.B. Basnet**, Chairman, Agro Enterprise Center

‘The effort has translated into increased access to crucial financial resources, improved market linkages, and enhanced sustainability practices. Through collaborative efforts and innovative approaches, we have been able to initiate dialogue with the major commercial banks of Nepal in regard to access to finance to agro-SMEs,’ said Basnet.

Looking to the future, the Hub aims to set up more partnerships with commercial banks and other financial institutions, building on its successful relationship with the NMB Bank. As part of the wider network of GreenToCompete Hubs globally, the best practices and

experiences being developed in Nepal are shared with partners in the Caribbean, Latin America, East Africa, and beyond. Meanwhile, Hub partner institutions continue advocating for other steps that can help Nepali agribusinesses have a better chance at growing and trading, such as better rural infrastructure and more support for value addition activities.



**LINK**

Learn more about GreenToCompete:  
<https://greentocompete.org/>

**FUNDERS**

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland

## CASE STUDY

## Empowering the next generation: Celebrating youth ecopreneurs

Crises from climate change to conflict have left the global economy reeling. Yet amid these converging crises, a bright spot emerges: the next generation of entrepreneurs is already here, with fresh ideas to help turn things around. But one of the hardest challenges for these young entrepreneurs is determining how to protect and monetize their ideas so that they can grow their businesses and trade.

The Youth Ecopreneurs Awards is looking to help change that by giving youth entrepreneurs funding, mentoring and training on intellectual property rights, along with public exposure, therefore showing that if you invest in the next generation of exporters, you invest in a greener, more equitable future.

The initiative, part of ITC's 'youth moonshot,' held a celebration of the second Youth Ecopreneurs Awards at the 2023 World Export Development Forum (WEDF), one of ITC's flagship events, which took place in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

The winning entries for the 2023 edition came from Oyungerel Munkhbat of Mongolia and Mashrur Hossain

Shurid of Bangladesh, who won in the categories of 'Green Business Solutions' and 'Land Restoration,' respectively. The people's choice award went to Chirag M G from India and his company Brown Reed Agri Waste Innovations (also known as Sunbird Coconut Leaf Straws).

Oyungerel runs a business that makes patented air filters, using sheep wool, to tackle the effects of air pollution while reducing the use of plastics normally found in air purifiers. With strong demand in her local market of Mongolia, her company, Airee Filter, is looking to expand to markets like Germany, Türkiye, and Viet Nam.

'Our team is extremely passionate about making clean air affordable to everyone without killing the planet in the meantime,' she told ITC.

Mashrur has been working to help Bangladeshi farmers scale up their production while limiting their environmental impact. As the CEO and co-founder of iPage, he's working with his team to deploy soil tests that farmers can use to assess soil health.





**1.** ITC delegation of youth ecopreneurs at COP28 in Dubai **2.** Oyungerel Munkhbat, co-founder of Airee and 2023 Youth Ecopreneur Award winner **3.** Youth ecopreneurs pitching their initiatives at WEDF 2023 in Mongolia

From there, iPage provides farmers with recommendations on the best crops, fertilizers, and pesticides to use, along with training to translate these tips into practice.

The Ecopreneur Awards are an initiative he would recommend to other young people hoping to make a difference. 'In the next year, those who are thinking of applying, come up with your inspiration, come up with your ideas, and give it your best shot,' Mashrur told ITC at the awards ceremony. He later told ITC that the award has also helped his company secure \$110,000 in funding.

*'Those who are thinking of applying, come up with your inspiration, come up with your ideas, and give it your best shot.'*

**Mashrur Hossain Shurid**, CEO and Co-Founder, iPage

The Sunbird Straws team similarly said the award has been a game-changer. 'From getting a global platform to tell our story to associating with Sidley Austin and WIPO who are helping us scale globally, the Ye! platform and the ecopreneur award have been nothing short of a dream come true for us,' Chirag M G told ITC.

With the \$5000 each winner took home in seed funding, along with mentorship and other support from partners like Google and WIPO, these ecopreneurs are now looking to take their innovative ideas to new heights — and new markets. Other partners who have been pivotal to the awards' success include the law firm Sidley Austin,

Google Startups for Sustainable Development, and the G20 Global Land Initiative under the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

Award winners have also had greater public exposure via features in ITC's *Trade Forum* magazine and the chance to attend and speak at events such as the SDG Summit, the Good Trade Summit, and the UN Climate Change Conference.

The 2023 edition of the awards drew 419 companies from over 60 countries. Applications for an expanded edition of the programme opened in early 2024, in partnership with the G20 Global Land Initiative. Now in the works are a global bootcamp and regional accelerator to help more ecopreneurs use the intellectual property rights system to their benefit and share their innovations with the world.



## LINK

Learn more about the Ye! Youth Ecopreneurs Programme: <https://social.yecommunity.com/page/youth-ecopreneur-programme>

## FUNDERS

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland



# Digital trade

The increasingly digital nature of the global economy is a well-known phenomenon, but new technological developments continue to recast how we understand the future of international trade. Artificial intelligence, which has long been part of daily life and work, has now taken on new meaning with the emergence of ChatGPT and other platforms, while blockchain technologies have been shown to have valuable applications to the practice of trade.

Online tools also play a crucial role in helping MSMEs determine what they need to access new markets, what opportunities are on offer, and who they could partner with to make trade an effective part of their business strategies. These tools are also opening new possibilities for reaching more MSMEs and BSOs than before. This includes through e-learning platforms, which are integral to ITC's offering.

Despite these benefits, the ability to get online and use the digital economy's affordances to the fullest isn't spread equally, including among MSMEs. Common challenges that MSMEs face when taking on new technologies include limited digital literacy and skills, even when digital connectivity itself is already ensured. Another challenge, given the nature of the digital economy, is that existing technologies keep changing, even as new ones enter the scene. This creates new opportunities, but also means that there are constantly new things to learn.

These disparities can mean the difference between success and failure for MSMEs in times of crisis,

as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2023 *SME Competitiveness Outlook* confirms that in fragile and conflict-affected settings, even innovative firms are often behind the 'technology frontier' as they prioritize how best to survive.

As one of ITC's moonshots, digital connectivity is both a goal in its own right and a catalyst for achieving the moonshots of green, gender, and youth. That's why the case studies in this section touch on digital trade as its own impact area in ITC's strategic plan, but also on digital connectivity and new technologies more broadly, given its cross-cutting significance for ITC's work. The highlights below chart where the conversation on digital connectivity evolved in 2023 and the role ITC is playing.

## 2023 highlights

ITC's Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton and GSMA's Director-General Mats Granryd co-chaired the Working Group on Connectivity for MSMEs under the **Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development**, releasing a report during the UN General Assembly week that looks at what it takes to get more MSMEs online, and what hurdles may stand in the way.

The new possibilities being opened up by artificial intelligence have led ITC to appoint an in-house AI advisor to help ensure that our integration of AI into our projects and strategies makes the most of this technology's possibilities, while being mindful of its potential pitfalls. The 2023 edition of the **SME Trade Academy Forum** had as its theme 'How to Harness AI





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1. ITC Executive Director delivering her remarks at the Broadband Commission during the United Nations General Assembly 78<sup>th</sup> session  
 2. Employee at NicaHat company in Nicaragua 3. Session on artificial intelligence organized by SME Trade Academy at ITC headquarters  
 4. Global Trade Helpdesk online platform

in Training for Development?', featuring experts from universities, international agencies, and technology companies.

Policymakers, for their part, continue to recognize the value of ITC's online platforms and tools for helping more MSMEs engage in international trade effectively. G20 trade and investment ministers meeting in Jaipur in August 2023 gave a resounding vote of confidence for the **Global Trade Helpdesk**, our joint initiative with the World Trade Organization and United Nations Trade and Development, and we are now working to upgrade the platform to incorporate the latest new technologies.

One of the cornerstones of the digital moonshot is ITC's **ecomConnect** programme, which among its many facets includes an online learning programme for MSMEs looking to increase their online sales; a **community platform** with over 6,500 active users worldwide; a market showcasing brands and products from MSMEs who participate in the programme; and much more.

For instance, ITC has **teamed up with Alibaba** under the E-Commerce Development for MSMEs project to provide training in marketing, e-commerce practices, and other key skills, using the ecomConnect platform. ITC's ecomConnect also joined up with **SheTrades Latin America** to offer trainings and related materials to various BSOs in the region, which in turn provided trainings for over 600 companies.

**Virtual marketplaces** continue opening new opportunities for MSMEs to access new markets, both in their regions and further afield. ITC has worked with several marketplaces over the years, providing MSMEs in the handicrafts sector with training and other support to help get their products online and reach new markets. For instance, ITC's collaboration with **NOVICA** and **eBay** under the Ready4Trade Central Asia project has helped artisans in several Central Asian economies make the most of what this platform has to offer, and results to date include over \$70,000 in sales via eBay and more than \$65,000 in sales via NOVICA.

# Digital Export Enablement Programme: Delivering for Southeast Asia's small businesses

Digital channels offer major opportunities for small businesses to sell to new markets, but also require big shifts in business strategy. Along with understanding trade flows and identifying promising opportunities, businesses must hone their digital marketing skills to make the most of what online platforms can make possible, while taking steps to protect their brand, thus retaining their identity and competitive advantage.

Throughout Southeast Asia, digital trade has become a top priority for its MSMEs, with a 2022 study by Google and ICC finding that 60% of the region's firms were interested in using it to access new markets. Despite these aspirations, 75% of firms reported that they would need better market analysis and digital marketing skills to make this goal become a reality.

In response, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), Google, ITC, and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) came together to pilot the Digital Export Enablement Programme (DEEP). The programme targets businesses across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) 10 member economies, aiming to help 1000 MSMEs as they build their skills in market analysis and digital marketing so they can trade online.

The programme brings together self-paced e-learning courses, hybrid workshops, and guidance on business strategy development for identifying and comparing opportunities in new markets. It brings in some of ITC's top online tools, such as Trade Map, the Export Potential Map, and the Global Trade Helpdesk, as well as those of its partners, such as Google's Market Finder and ICC Incoterms.

DEEP also helps firms prepare their digital audit and digital marketing plans across relevant digital channels

and brings them into the ecomConnect community of digital entrepreneurs, while guiding them on intellectual property rights protections and branding considerations. To help put their strategies into action, DEEP offers personalized coaching for the most dedicated firms.

The programme has attracted registrations from participants representing over 1,300 firms, of which 53% were women, hailing from Brunei, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam, and Singapore. Workshops across these countries also benefit from strong support from local counterparts, including via partnerships with Thailand's Innovation Technology Assistance Programme (ITAP), the Vietnam E-Commerce Association, and Indonesia's ICC Centre of Entrepreneurship.

*'We aspire that programmes like this one will strengthen digital literacy for every Filipino.'*

**Miguel Aliño Lopez**, DEEP Trainer, The Philippines

In 2023 alone, 638 firms completed the programme and received certification, with 95% of them reporting plans to change their business operations based on what they had learned.

'I am amazed by firms' gratitude for having access to these digital tools. We aspire that programmes like this one will strengthen digital literacy for every Filipino, fostering a future where technology is more accessible and empowering for all,' said Miguel Aliño Lopez, DEEP Trainer for the Philippines.



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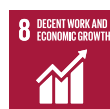
1. – 4. Digital Export Enablement Programme (DEEP) pilot for small businesses in ASEAN countries, such as Viet Nam (1.), Malaysia (2.) and the Philippines (3. & 4.)

Programme participants like Crystal Lim, a business development manager for RW Nutriogreen, credited DEEP for changing her perspective on what it takes to engage with new markets.

‘The most valuable skill that I learned from the training was how to check for the right HS codes and to be aware of the many digital tools which are readily available for us to use, as not many people are aware of them,’ Lim said.

This training saved her company the costs of hiring an external consultant, as it now has key skills like how to explore export potential and understand tariffs and regulations in target markets, such as the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Thailand, and potentially the United States.

As part of ITC’s ‘digital moonshot’ to help MSMEs boost their digital connectivity, DEEP integrates and builds on diverse areas of expertise across the house, thus providing entrepreneurs with multifaceted, coherent support to help them make the most of what the digital economy has to offer.



#### LINK

Learn more about DEEP: <https://intracen.org/digital-export-enablement-programme-deep-for-asean-small-businesses>

#### FUNDER

Google

# Switching ON in Zambia: Welcoming the next generation of digital entrepreneurs

As digital technologies continue to reshape the way we live, work, and trade, there is a growing need for skilled workers to fill new digital jobs. This creates a major opportunity for Zambia's youth population, where over one in 10 are currently unemployed, and comes at a critical moment in the implementation of the country's National Development Plan 2022-2026.

'Digital capacity has now more than ever become fundamental and an enabler to meet the new and ever-changing demands of the digital world,' Bernard Banda, Director, Economic Regulation, at the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA), told ITC.

With more digital jobs on offer, he added, firms must improve the services they provide, add new ones, and find people with the right skillset. 'This has also extended to the need for cybersecurity of embedded e-commerce systems or digital services,' he affirmed.

*'Digital capacity has now more than ever become fundamental and an enabler to meet the new and ever-changing demands of the digital world.'*

**Bernard Banda**, Director, Economic Regulation, ZICTA

The National Development Plan identifies among its strategies for transforming the Zambian economy the need to build digital capacity, given the possibilities it affords Zambian youth entrepreneurs and what it could mean for people living in rural areas.

To help make good on the promises of this burgeoning digital economy, ITC teamed up with the Women's Entrepreneurship Access Center and ZICTA. The goal was to help train 175 people in Lusaka and Livingstone so they could incorporate the latest digital technologies and tools, like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and social media, in their freelance work.

Out of the 175 youth participants, nearly half were women, and to date over 60 of these freelancers have set up profiles on new freelancer platforms. Forty-three





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1. Participants receiving their certificates at the WeDigit Freelancer graduation in Zambia 2. & 3. WeDigit Freelancer graduation event in Zambia

participants have since reported back that the training has opened up lucrative new work opportunities for them.

‘The We’Digit training programme gave me the confidence to complete my e-commerce website, as I was able to apply the knowledge I gained from the training,’ said Mercy Chewetu Mukupa, Founder and CEO of Queen of Chitenge Fashion Ltd. She plans to use the website to bring other designers on board, along with getting advertising revenue.

Clive Lusana, a digital freelancer based in Livingstone, credited the training for helping her learn how to use artificial intelligence tools for creating digital content. ‘The DIY model really helped me take responsibility over my own future,’ Clive said.

This training programme is the latest chapter in ITC’s ongoing work in Zambia to tackle the digital connectivity gap and create new opportunities for the country’s MSMEs. For instance, ITC, under its Fast Tracking Digital Entrepreneurship in Africa programme supported by the Government of the Netherlands, has already trained several tech hubs, tech start-ups, and digital entrepreneurs on how to use the latest digital skills and tools.

Under that programme, also known as FastTrackTech Switch ON, ITC has brought entrepreneurs from some of these start-ups to major international events, such as the 2023 Mobile World Congress in Barcelona and Web Summit in Lisbon, to network with peers. Thanks to these efforts, entrepreneurs like Muchu Kaingu, Chief Technology Officer of Zambia-headquartered micro-finance company Lupiya, have been able to make valuable connections.

‘These are partners we can leverage to continue building our platform,’ Kaingu said, referring to the new partners he connected with at Web Summit in 2023. ‘We’re also talking with an internationalization partner to register

a holding company in the U.S., which would give us better access to capital.’

Lupiya has now raised \$8.25 million in Series A financing, which it credits to ITC’s involvement via the FastTrackTech Switch ON work. This support is part of ITC’s strategy for making more Zambian fintech start-ups investment ready, so they can pitch directly to investors and venture capital providers at events like the annual Investor Days in Lusaka.

Looking ahead, ITC and its partners will focus their efforts on steps like improving digital connectivity in Zambia’s urban and rural areas, making internet access chapter and more consistent. Other upcoming activities include work on virtual marketplaces for e-commerce and helping MSMEs adopt online payment solutions, to name a few.

Zambia itself is a pilot country for similar efforts throughout the continent and further afield, which are all part of ITC’s ‘digital moonshot’ and align with its current 2022-2025 strategic plan.



## LINK

Learn more about ITC’s digital moonshot in Zambia: <https://intracen.org/news-and-events/news/better-digital-connectivity-for-small-businesses-to-trade>

## FUNDERS

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland

## Internally displaced persons in Ukraine: Building digital skills for economic resilience

With two years having passed since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there are now over 11 million Ukrainians displaced, with nearly 3.7 million people internally displaced according to data from the International Organization for Migration.

One of these people is Hanna, who first moved from the Donetsk region in 2014 with her young child, and who has since had to move again with her family as a result of the escalating hostilities. Trying to raise a family, ensure their personal safety, and adapt to the many disruptions in accessing basic goods and services meant that finding new employment was difficult.

The ongoing conflict has hurt at least 65% of Ukraine's businesses, but as the crisis continues, those businesses that have survived are adapting to the current context. For instance, *Ekonomichna Pravda* reports that around 77% of the companies that are part of the European Business Association of Ukraine have now resumed normal business operations as of October 2023.

Hanna is one of many displaced Ukrainians who have taken part in an ITC project funded by Japan to help build their economic resilience. In Hanna's case, she enrolled in IT training with the Projector Institute, a Ukrainian NGO which is one of the local partners, where she and over 60 other women learned skills such as search engine optimization (SEO).

The SEO training led to a new job, and later Hanna decided to open her own digital marketing agency to have the flexibility she and her family need, especially in the current context. Today, Hanna is honing her skills by completing several orders for small businesses and is considering further education to tackle more complex tasks for her clients.

Hanna is one of many individuals that have received specialized IT training under the project, giving them much-needed flexibility in a fragile situation, while helping ensure they can earn good incomes to support themselves and their families. In 2023 alone, 900 people applied to take part in the IT training, with 63 selected. Forty-nine of the participants received certification in new IT skills, with over a dozen reporting that the training had helped them find new jobs as a result.

In parallel, over 216 MSMEs have received e-commerce training, helping them reach international markets. National partners, like the Entrepreneurship and Export Promotion Office, have played a critical role in delivering these trainings. The project has also provided support for seven communities through a partnership with the Regional Development Agency of the Tavia Association of Territorial Communities, bringing together everyone from internally displaced persons to local officials so they can determine their priorities and craft a more inclusive business ecosystem.

ITC's work in Ukraine also spans other areas, such as ongoing efforts supported by the EU that focus on fruit, vegetable, nut, and wine producers. These agribusinesses are facing increased difficulty in getting their products to international markets, due to issues such as electricity shortages or the need to find alternate export routes that often take more time and resources.

With more of ITC's projects are taking place in fragile and conflict-affected settings, the 2023 *SME Competitiveness Outlook* is dedicated to helping understand what this fragility means for small businesses, such as how basic service disruptions and the changing nature of the market affect their ability



1. – 4. Global e-commerce access training in Ukraine 5. Anna Chumakova, one of the training participants in Ukraine

to survive and grow. Ukraine was one of the eight countries included in the ITC Small Businesses in Fragility Survey that helped inform the publication (for more on the SMECO findings, see the related case study).

Looking ahead, this Japan-funded project is preparing to help other internally displaced persons in Ukraine build their IT skills, while providing export training and coaching. It is also preparing to expand its outreach to more communities to help engage internally displaced persons, including in regions such as Odesa and Mikolaiv.



## LINK

Learn more about ITC's work to support displacement-affected communities in Ukraine: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/ukraine-building-economic-resilience-of-displacement-affected-communities>

## FUNDER

Japan



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## Regional integration and South-South trade and investment

Recent years have reinforced that forging deeper ties and reducing barriers to trade and investment within and across regions can achieve far more than economic growth. These efforts can also lead to new opportunities for MSMEs, BSOs, policymakers, and other key stakeholders in the trade community to learn from one another and develop shared paths forward towards sustainable development.

With the African Continental Free Trade Area wrapping up its third year of trading, and regional economic communities across the continent working to ramp up their integration efforts, major changes are on the horizon for both intra-African trade and for African trade with partners in other world regions. Our One Trade Africa programme has foregrounded why the AfCFTA's success is contingent on MSMEs' active involvement, especially those small businesses led by women, youth, and vulnerable populations.

Steps to increase regional trade and build closer relationships are also underway in regions from Southeast Asia to Central Asia to Latin America, as case studies in both this section and throughout this Annual Report show. Those featured in this section shine a spotlight on the range of regional integration projects underway, and showcase how ITC's moonshots, from green to gender to youth to digital, are all at play.

The highlights in this narrative summary take a wide-angle look at some of our other initiatives underway on regional integration and South-South trade, and what to watch over the coming years. As with ITC's projects around the world, our work to support regional

integration and South-South trade relies heavily on partnerships, including with BSOs, local institutions, governments, development partners, and private sector actors, all in the spirit of our Partnerships4Purpose strategy.

### 2023 highlights

Our work in the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) supports regional integration and the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025. ITC's technical assistance contributed to further strengthening regional economic integration, supporting ASEAN objectives to open new trade routes by reducing the costs of doing business, driving policy cooperation, and facilitating the formation of and participation in regional and international value chains.

MSMEs in the region benefit from an improved business environment, policies, and processes to increase their export competitiveness under the ARISE Plus projects. These include work on trade facilitation and transparency, quality management, and standards and conformity assessment with government entities and regulators. ITC implements five EU-funded ARISE Plus country projects in Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand.

A major part of building South-South trade involves tackling questions and concerns that cross-border traders often face, from how to cross a border formally and how to address potential harassment or corruption. Building the capacity of small-scale, cross-border trader





**1.** Launch of MARKUP II in Tanzania **2.** Session on enhancing trade in food, farm goods within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the 10th Annual Borderless Conference in Ghana **3.** Sutee Preechawut, mangosteen farmer from Chantaburi, Thailand **4.** Aishan Sulaiman, CEO of Royal Pearls Resources Ltd., exhibiting at the Food & Beverage West Africa Trade Fair in Nigeria

associations can be a big step in that direction, which is why ITC is working to support these associations within the **Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)**.

Our **West African Competitiveness Programme (WACOMP)** remains highly active in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where some of the milestones from 2023 include supporting SMEs in taking part in networking events and trade fairs, like the Africa Cassava Conference, the AfriCaribbean Trade and Investment Forum, and the Intra-African Trade Fair. Participation in events like these can yield major dividends for small businesses: for instance, 11 SMEs that ITC supported to take part in the West Africa Food and Beverage Trade Fair, including four led by women, were able to undertake transactions generating over \$40,000 in total revenue.

In East Africa, our **EU-EAC Market Access Upgrade Programme (MARKUP)** with the EU and the East African Community kicked off its second phase in late 2023, setting the stage to support more East African MSMEs across sectors from avocado and coffee to spices and packaging.

Examples like these abound across ITC's work, as can be seen in examples like Alliances for Coconut Industry Development for the Caribbean, which is not only supporting regional efforts at improving food security, but is also leading to major environmental benefits, which is why it features as a case study in the 'green trade' section of this Annual Report.

Separately, ITC's **SheTrades Hubs** include two that serve entire regions: one for the Middle East and North Africa, hosted by the Dubai Economic Development Corporation (DED) – Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism, and another for the Caribbean, which launched in late 2023 and is hosted in partnership with the Caribbean Development Bank. The networking, training, and market linkage opportunities available make it possible for more women-led businesses and BSOs in these regions to come together.

## CASE STUDY

# Preparing for graduation day: Setting the stage for Lao PDR's next chapter

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a landlocked country in Southeast Asia with an export potential of up to \$1.4 billion. It is on track to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Country (LDC) list in November 2026, and ahead of this milestone, Lao PDR is preparing for what this will mean for its economic ties with key trading partners like China, the European Union, and its fellow Southeast Asian economies.

ITC research shows that graduating from LDC status could cost the Laotian economy up to \$734 million in exports, or 7.3%, with the heaviest losses felt in sectors like natural latex and rubber, apparel, and footwear. However, that research also indicated that with the right preparations, Lao PDR could see major gains in untapped trade potential in certain sectors, and often these gains can offset some of the losses.

LDC graduation is an important transition process, requiring extensive preparation. One key change graduating LDCs face, for instance, is the loss of certain flexibilities under World Trade Organization rules, along with eligibility for duty-free, quota-free market access for nearly all tariff lines, minus those involving arms and

ammunition, to the EU market under the Everything But Arms preference scheme.

The COVID-19 pandemic made clearer which areas would need to be shored up, while highlighting the urgency of focusing on activities to support more climate-resilient value chains, along with empowering women- and youth-led businesses.

That is why ITC has been active in Lao PDR for the past five years under the ARISE Plus project, an EU-funded regional initiative, to help lay the groundwork for graduation and what follows. Under the same project, ITC has also worked in Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand. The work is designed to align with the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025, which sets out strategies for greater economic integration within the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The ARISE Plus work incorporated the lessons learned from the pandemic and involved working with Lao PDR to build deeper economic ties with regional partners, such as fellow ASEAN member states. Another aspect involved seeing what EU preference schemes Lao PDR will have access to after graduation, and for which products.





**1.** Launch event of Lao PDR Quality for Trade Platform **2.** Award winner at Lao Green Coffee Competition, Lao PDR **3.** Sysomsack Keobouangern tests water samples for possible metal contaminants to improve food safety in Lao PDR **4.** Woman exhibitor from Lao PDR at Thaifex 2023-Anuga Asia in Thailand

ITC’s work in Lao PDR targeted economic sectors — such as wood and coffee — that will be important for MSME exports during this new chapter. ITC helped MSMEs make their practices more climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable, especially given the many sustainability standards and trade-related environmental regulations in place. Under the project, more than 200 deals were reported by wood and coffee companies, mostly to EU markets, ranging from Belgium to Spain, and with partners in the region and elsewhere, from Australia to Japan to the United States of America.

ITC has also prepared an export guide for high-value wood as a basis for in-depth trainings with MSMEs, which will support their efforts to strengthen the legal supply of timber and meet market requirements. According to Deputy Director-General Somvang Phimmavong of the Ministry of Forestry, the guide is ‘meticulously crafted... a tool designed to provide detailed insights, strategies, and practical advice, with a strong emphasis on sustainability.’

Also critical under the project have been steps like coaching MSMEs and helping them build linkages to new markets, along with providing business-to-business and policy-related technical assistance. These aimed to enable more integrated value chains, with higher-quality products yielding better prices.

By participating in the ‘Taste of Laos’ coffee competition, Nambeng Coffee Group, Mekong Lao Company, and Slow Organic Coffee Coop have all reported greater interest and sales from domestic and international buyers. Meanwhile, a chance to be part of the Lao coffee exhibition at World of Coffee Athens 2023 meant that Comma Coffee was able to invest beyond its domestic market, having seen the potential business interest both for purchasing Lao-produced coffee and for attracting investors.

‘We have managed to gain international exposure for our products, build business connections, also have more awareness of international standards,’ one company told ITC.

The Quality Champions initiative put in place by ITC and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI) showcases many success stories from this work, which are available online to inspire change and highlight best practices. The initiative has trained several ‘quality champions’ in export control so they can pass on their knowledge to MSMEs.

With the ARISE Plus Lao PDR project having drawn to a close, ITC has established a Virtual Learning Space that current and future users can use as Lao PDR approaches the LDC graduation finish line.



**LINK**

Learn more about ARISE Plus in Lao PDR: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/lao-pdr-asean-regional-integration-support-laos-arise-plus>

**FUNDER**

European Union

## CASE STUDY

# Welcoming a new era for Pan-African trade: The Intra-African Trade Fair

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) began trading in January 2021, and the years since have seen a concerted effort across multiple fronts to help translate the vision behind the landmark pan-African trade deal into practice.

To date, trade within the continent is at only 14%, much as the export potential is \$22 billion. The AfCFTA aims to change all that, and with a market of 1.3 billion people with a combined gross domestic product of \$3.4 trillion, one of the key indicators of the treaty's success will be whether the MSMEs that power the continent's economy can use the once-in-a-generation accord to its full potential.

This, however, presents several challenges: while over 50% of African MSMEs surveyed have told ITC that are still learning about the agreement, even those businesses that are aware of it face an uphill climb in obtaining the necessary skills, finance, resources, and connections to use it fully. If achieved, however, the results could be transformative, especially for delivering on the African Union's Agenda 2063, which maps out Africa's sustainable development priorities and how to get there over the coming decades.

For several years, ITC has been working with the AfCFTA Secretariat and other AU partners under its One Trade Africa initiative to support MSMEs across Africa as they prepare for what the AfCFTA could mean for them, while engaging with policymakers and business ecosystem players on what opportunities the trade accord could open for developing priority value chains, creating jobs for women and youth, improving food security, and more.

These efforts all came together in November 2023, when ITC brought a large delegation of small businesses to Cairo, Egypt, for the Intra-African Trade Fair hosted by the African-Export Import Bank. The goal? To showcase at Africa's largest continental trade fair the breadth and depth of what the AfCFTA has to offer small businesses, while hearing from MSMEs about what they will need most as the treaty's implementation picks up steam.

*'This is a good place to be, to learn what African companies are doing and see what we can do together.'*

**Sylvie Sagbo Gommard**, CEO, Senar

ITC brought two dozen MSMEs to the fair, who came from nine African countries and who work in sectors ranging from agriculture to textiles and clothing to services. These visiting MSMEs also had the chance to take part in study tours to other parts of Egypt to see chocolate, onion, and mango production in action, along with taking part in business-to-business and business-to-government activities.

'We used to go far away from Africa to export, to work with [others], and I think that maybe it would be easier for us to work with African companies. And I think that this is a good place to be, to learn what African companies are doing and see what we can do together,' said Sylvie Sagbo Gommard, the CEO of Senegal-based company Senar, who took part in the AfCFTA Export Readiness Masterclass.



**1.** Ghanaian woman entrepreneurs showcasing products at ITC's stand during the 2023 Intra-African Trade Fair **2.** Catching up with ITC's Senegal team and WACOMP Senegal beneficiaries **3. & 4.** Session on facilitating agricultural trade through technology at the 2023 Intra-African Trade Fair

With the 2023 IATF in the rearview mirror, participating MSMEs are now looking at how they can use what they learned in their daily work.

*'After my participation in the IATF fair, I noticed a lot of things to be done in terms of modernizing the agricultural sector in Togo.'*

Thomas Kossi Garfo, TIC TOGO

'In the coming days, I will submit to GIZ a business plan which will bring together more than 3,000 Togolese cooperatives on a marketplace.'

As this work continues, another priority will be ensuring that these small businesses, as they get ready to trade more closely with their counterparts within Africa, are also well-placed to export their goods and services

further afield and tap into diaspora linkages, such as to the Caribbean. ITC research shows, for instance, that the untapped export potential of African-Caribbean trade is over \$1 billion, covering sectors from agrifood to tourism.



**LINK**

Learn more about One Trade Africa: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/one-trade-africa-connecting-the-african-business-community-with-the-afcfta>

**FUNDERS**

Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, African Export Import Bank, European Union, UNIDO, the Netherlands, Germany

## CASE STUDY

# The Central Asia Gateway: Helping small businesses navigate trade corridors

From leather goods to ceramics, from herbal teas to handmade pillows, small businesses throughout Central Asia are increasingly looking to get their products to markets, particularly in neighbouring countries. One of the biggest challenges they face, however, emerges when it comes time to fill out the right paperwork, and getting it to the right place and on time.

Exporting and importing, even to buyers and consumers in countries next door, can often require several steps and formalities, which require time that small businesses rarely have. Even when this information exists, it can often be spread out over several websites and in different languages.

A new online platform is changing all that. Known as the Central Asia Gateway, it builds on a state-of-the-art methodology that ITC and UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) have honed over more than a decade, consolidating information on over 300 trade flows which reflect the goods that the region's small businesses trade most. Users can visit the website and easily see a step-by-step overview of what import and export procedures look like along trade corridors by both country and product, from beans and bottled water to flour and footwear.

The gateway pools this information from the National Trade Facilitation Portals of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which all played an active role in making this online resource come to life. It is also a contribution towards helping the region realize the objectives of the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Trade Facilitation: namely, to cut red tape at the border and ease trading processes, including through better, verifiable, and accessible information.

Having this region-wide portal is saving exporters and importers alike valuable time, said Larisa Kislyakova, Head of the Central Asia Transport and Logistics Association. Users tell Larisa that the portal 'is very important and very flexible in their work,' giving them the chance to make course corrections throughout the trading process.

The time that small businesses save has translated to far lower costs: for instance, current estimates suggest that the costs of cross-border trade have already gone down by \$1 million for the Tajik business community as a whole.

The gateway is continually being updated to reflect the latest information and additional trade flows and has drawn public praise from local policymakers and the international community. In 2023, it was awarded the title of 'Best Trade Information Portal' at the World Investment Forum hosted by UN Trade and Development in Abu Dhabi. To date, the Gateway has attracted 225,000 users and counting, who can access the information in English, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik, Turkmen, or Uzbek. Having this information in one place has also helped inform new initiatives to help streamline cross-border trade processes where possible and digitize key steps.

The gateway is about more than information gathering: it includes a Trade Facilitation Index so local institutions can share their best trade facilitation practices, monitor how these efforts are playing out, and more. Another key component is a 'corridor view' for users wishing to see how trade corridors work within the region and what this entails.



**1.** Uzbek woman employee managing automatic sewing machines **2.** Central Asia Gateway wins ‘Best Trade Information Portal’ Award at World Investment Forum in Abu Dhabi **3.** Uzbek farmer checking wheat quality **4.** Transport and logistics infrastructure are essential for greater South-South trade

The EU-funded Ready4Trade Central Asia project, of which the gateway is a major component, also features other critical pillars: from training women so they are better positioned to undertake trade and customs careers, to connecting artisans and craftspeople with virtual marketplaces to sell online.

As ITC continues its engagement in Central Asia, this big-picture approach is key to ensuring that the region’s small businesses are in the best position to compete, and in turn give back to their communities.



**LINK**

Learn more about Ready4Trade Central Asia: <https://intracen.org/our-work/projects/central-asia-ready4trade-r4tca>

**FUNDER**

European Union



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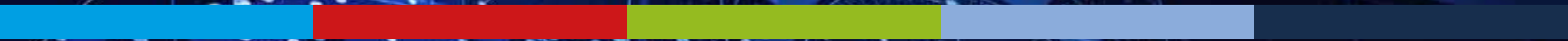
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# Corporate results



# Our value proposition

ITC's value proposition is built around our organizational strengths of trust, expertise, connectedness, and agility. Whether through our steps to manage data securely

or through our dedication to innovation, how we work is as important as what we are working towards as an organization.



## Trust

We generate trust as a neutral and inclusive organization.

## Expertise

We create knowledge and skills to empower stakeholders.



## Connectedness

We facilitate dialogue and support between and among clients and partners.

## Agility

We customize and innovate to make sure clients receive the right solutions.



# Moving forward

2023 was a year of reflection and action for ITC, as we looked at how to update the way we work internally to better reflect our values and our aspirations.

Recognizing our difficulties is not an easy or glamorous task. It is, however, an essential one if we're going to deliver on our vision, mission, and mandate: we can't serve our beneficiaries well unless we fully practice our own UN values and behaviours at home. The ITC Moving Forward Action Plan was launched in February 2023 with this objective in mind. It features a 26-point plan, split into two sections: tackling prohibited conduct at ITC and building a better workplace.

The first section, on prohibited conduct, looks at tackling both immediate challenges, along with setting up mechanisms to better prevent prohibited conduct and deal effectively with such situations when they arise. It features a six-point plan, which includes starting external investigations by independent authorities on allegations of prohibited conduct, along with putting in place an Ombudsperson who, while external to ITC, is devoted to our specific needs when it comes to informal systems for resolving conflicts, including where it makes sense to move from informal to formal measures.

Other action points include steps to make sure ITC's system for handling prohibited conduct and its accountability framework, respectively, are in line with UN best practice and standards, and steps to make clear across the house our 'zero tolerance' policy on bullying, harassment, and discrimination. These efforts also involve ensuring ITC personnel know where to go for reporting grievances and know how these processes are handled.

The second section is about achieving the workplace we want: one where everyone feels empowered, whether they are just starting their careers as interns or have decades of experience. This 20-point plan has already achieved some notable milestones, such as the decision to provide financial support to ITC's interns, along with setting up internal groups to review how well we are putting UN values and behaviours into practice and where we can improve. We have revamped our performance appraisal process and are doing the same with how we treat career development, recognizing that our personnel are our greatest asset.



*ITC townhall meeting on the Moving Forward initiative*

These are just a few examples among many, and the progress achieved in just one year is a testament to the dedication of our own ITC community. We intend to keep building on this progress throughout 2024 and beyond. This includes, for instance, the work we have underway to create better working conditions for consultants and contractors, along with ongoing efforts to craft 'rules of collaboration' for how our different teams within the 'One ITC' umbrella engage with one another.

Transparency and dialogue are instrumental for Moving Forward's success, and to ensure that we continue taking stock of where we are doing well, where more work is needed, and what new needs may arise. In practice, that means ITC has now put in place regular townhalls hosted by ITC's Executive Director, along with monthly office hours for the Executive Director to meet with any interested personnel. Regular engagement between executive leadership and the ITC Staff Council and revamped Employee Engagement Surveys, with subsequent measures to follow up on their results, are also critical to advancing on the Moving Forward Action Plan.

Change is never easy, and to achieve lasting change takes time. What ITC Moving Forward has already shown us, however, is that by coming together around a shared goal of a supportive workplace that we can all be proud of, we can and will get much farther than we could have imagined possible. This is an initiative that we remain committed to for the long term, and where we pledge to keep listening, to keep learning, and to keep growing.



## How we deliver results

The results outlined in this Annual Report provide a snapshot of a much bigger portfolio of projects around the world. Their successes depend on being able to identify, prepare for, and mitigate risks; track and report on the progress of our work over time; and ensure we comply with internal controls that are critical for the effectiveness of our interventions and for maintaining the trust of our beneficiaries and partners.

### Risk management

Management (ERM) Framework and Policy helps ensure that ITC lives up to its full potential and maintains a strong reputation for consistency, value, and impact. Drawing from this Framework and Policy, and thanks to biannual sessions on how to manage risk at the corporate levels, ITC has mitigated several risks throughout 2023, such as those involving funding and currency exchange rate fluctuations.

The Moving Forward Action Plan has provided valuable guidance on how ITC can improve its assessment and management of risk, which ITC is now acting on. For instance, the measures set out in the Moving Forward Action Plan on tackling prohibited conduct are now listed in ITC's risk register. These measures include the campaign to raise awareness on how to report prohibited conduct, along with steps so that ITC personnel can access both UN and ITC systems that relate to prohibited conduct, including fraud.

As part of the Moving Forward Action Plan, independent advisors also reviewed the ERM Framework and Policy in 2023, and ITC's senior management committee has now approved an updated version. There are steps currently underway to provide updated risk training materials to personnel, along with teaching them what the ERM Framework and Policy mean for their work and why.

### Internal controls

Another key aspect of managing risks involves having effective and well-defined internal controls. Last year, ITC continued acting on recommendations from three oversight bodies: the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the Joint Inspection Unit (further detailed in the 'Evaluation and performance' section of this report), and the Board of Auditors. The latter has again given ITC an unqualified audit opinion. These oversight bodies give valuable guidance over where these internal controls can be improved, which ITC has taken on board. Some of the internal controls where ITC has improved its compliance efforts include those involving travel, such as buying tickets in advance, developing the most cost-effective approach possible, and weighing where remote or hybrid options might work well instead for delivering interventions.



1. Supporting diversity and inclusion © Shutterstock.com 2. ITC Open Data Portal publishing IATI data

## Results-based management

While identifying, mitigating, and avoiding risks are key facets of ITC's work, so is ensuring that our interventions deliver concrete results for the MSMEs we serve. To get a clearer picture of our progress, ITC has released a beta version of new management dashboards to get feedback from personnel on how well these work and what needs adjusting. Other major milestones include a new version of the ITC Open Data Portal, which is part of ITC's work to implement the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI).

Other key developments include the update of ITC's project management guidelines, setting out best practices and organization-specific standards and requirements for how ITC undertakes project planning, monitors progress, and reports on outcomes and impact. They include, among other facets, guidance on a project's inception phase, with a related checklist on inception phase deliverables, along with easy-to-use templates and tools for project monitoring.

With the four moonshots now well underway, ITC has undertaken a corporate-level review on how its projects are supporting the delivery of the green and digital moonshots, and has helped clarify how to measure progress in both. As noted in the section of this report on 'Advancing diversity, inclusion, and equity,' a disability marker for ITC projects is in the works and related guidelines for mainstreaming disability and inclusion into ITC's programmatic work will be finalized in 2024.

Quarterly and on-demand sessions on results-based management, covering topics from risk assessment to corporate tools like ITC surveys, also took place throughout the year.

Reporting is another key pillar of how ITC manages for results. ITC projects are increasingly using corporate templates that feature 'areas of change,' with these templates making it possible to qualify and describe any given corporate indicator. This leads to more precise planning, monitoring, and reporting of results at the corporate level, allowing ITC to see its impact in a more nuanced way. At a time where mainstreaming and moonshots are becoming more important than ever for ITC's work and its beneficiaries, these corporate templates are proving to be invaluable.

ITC continually takes steps to report on its progress to the relevant bodies, including the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and works with fellow UN agencies such as the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) to help inform how UN INFO Output Indicators are defined. ITC is listed as the owner and co-owner of various indicators, given the relationship between these and MSMEs or business support organizations.



## Evaluation and performance

Evaluation is a crucial instrument for all ITC interventions. It supports organizational learning and knowledge development and ensures accountability against expected results. Evaluations support ITC's policy, programme, and project management decision-making to improve performance and enhance our contribution to achieving the SDGs. The Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU) is the custodian of ITC's evaluation function. The unit directly manages evaluations and reviews and provides advisory services on evaluation matters within the organization.

In 2023, 18 evaluations and reviews were finalized. Of these, three were independently completed by the IEU, two self-evaluations were conducted by project managers with IEU support, and 13 were funder-led. The table provides summaries of IEU independent evaluations completed in 2023.

In line with the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation and the ITC Evaluation Guidelines, the IEU monitors the implementation status of evaluation recommendations. This helps ensure that IEU recommendations contribute to ITC's organizational effectiveness, learning, and accountability. At the end of the third quarter of 2023, the biannual status review reported that the IEU had monitored 35

recommendations: 15 had been fully implemented, one was partially implemented, 17 were in progress, and two were yet to be initiated.

At the request of project teams and as part of its advisory services, the IEU supports project teams in their Project Completion Report (PCR) preparations, paving the way for a common understanding of project performance and the improvements that can be introduced in future interventions. In 2023, 34 projects (87% of the total) complied with submitting their PCRs within the mandated six-month period after the project end date.

The IEU actively supports the work of UNEG and contributes to corporate reporting on ITC's participation in the UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (GEEW) and the implementation of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (for more information on both, see the section on 'Advancing diversity, inclusion, and equity' in this report). In 2023, the IEU contributed to completing two Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) publications. As the ITC focal point for the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), the IEU facilitated ITC's contribution to completing six JIU system-wide reports and participation in two additional ongoing JIU reviews.



1. Olympia Beauty Trade Fair 2023 in London 2. Ibrahim Thiam, president and CEO of Allido Food in Senegal

## Summary of IEU Independent evaluations and reviews completed in 2023

### 2023 Annual Evaluation Synthesis Report (AESR)

The [2023 AESR](#) covered evaluations and reviews from January to December 2022, including evaluations carried out by the IEU, self-evaluations, funder-led evaluations and reviews, and Project Completion Reports. Continuing the approach initiated in 2022, it assessed the findings from evaluation reports and reviews against the main dimensions of the ITC Strategic Plan 2022-25. The document was presented to UN Member States and WTO Members and discussed at the annual ITC Joint Advisory Group meeting in July 2023.

### Final evaluation of the United Kingdom Trade Partnership (UKTP) Programme

The UKTP Programme was designed to support African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries in taking advantage of the duty-free, quota-free access to the European Union and UK markets that they enjoy under the Economic Partnership Agreements. One year after the start of operations (2020), the programme's annual budget was decreased due to an overall reduction in the UK's Overseas Development Assistance. Consequently, the programme had to reprioritize its activities. In terms of sustainability, the evaluation observed that although the reprogramming allowed, in some cases, for more cost-effective implementation, the deprioritization of outcomes focused on the business environment and trade facilitation had an impact on the interventions' long-term sustainability. Therefore, the evaluation recommended that future UKTP programmes adopt strong exit strategies and overall sustainability measures, particularly for improving the business environment of the countries involved. It was also observed that for such a large aid-for-trade programme, there was a need for a stronger monitoring and

evaluation (M&E) function, covering both technical and financial outputs, to ensure the recording of progress, challenges, and learning.

### Evaluation of ITC's work on agricultural value chains – 'Sustainable and resilient value chains.'

This was an evaluation of the portfolio of ITC projects that support agricultural value chains, covering the period 2018-2022. The evaluation observed ample evidence of positive contributions to strengthening MSMEs' competitiveness and improving their processes and practices within agricultural value chains. Success was seen in improving the operational and managerial performance of organizations, associations, and networks in agricultural value chains. In many instances, ITC has opened new markets for MSMEs by facilitating relationships among buyers, sellers, service providers and regulatory institutions that operate within or influence the range of activities required to bring agricultural products from their start to their end-use. However, from an overall perspective and despite notable successes, the absence of a programmatic approach to agricultural value chains in ITC has also led to a series of stand-alone projects. This is clearly affecting internal coherence, sometimes in terms of the comprehensiveness and quality of the proposed solutions. As a result, the evaluation recommends a shared or corporate conceptual framework for agricultural value chain support that addresses their complexity and results holistically. Moreover, it recommends that ITC projects supporting agricultural value chains better address challenges and opportunities related to inclusivity, climate change, and regional integration, while also facilitating and brokering solutions to finance for MSMEs.



## Data management

All ITC teams rely on data, which informs how decisions are made, interventions are designed, and projects and programmes are crafted and implemented. Not only are data an important tool for evidence-based approaches, but they are also key for building trust: by managing data well, it can prove to beneficiaries, constituencies, funders and partners that ITC is accountable, consistent, and at the cutting-edge of best practices.

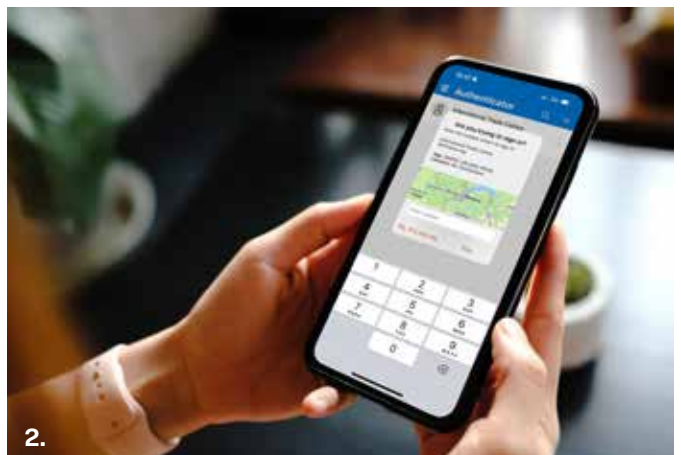
Critical to this work is the UN Secretary-General's Data Strategy, which underpins ITC's own work in this area and highlights the value of analytics and data management. From forging connections with ecosystems outside the UN system to treating data as a strategic asset, the strategic vision and direction outlined in this document informs both the ITC Implementation Roadmap 2022-2025 and the related ITC Data Management Initiative.

This Data Management Initiative, referred to in the current ITC strategic plan, is now well advanced in its implementation. Among the milestones seen in 2023 were putting in place a single sign-on feature across additional ITC platforms and applications for more user-friendliness and efficiency; rolling out a mobile application for collecting data offline, as well as a mass mailing application to facilitate project communication; and enacting a policy for client data management.

Also notable throughout the year was the work to introduce a governance structure for how ITC approaches management and decision-making on data-related matters, along with building on existing systems, such as the ITC events management system and survey application.



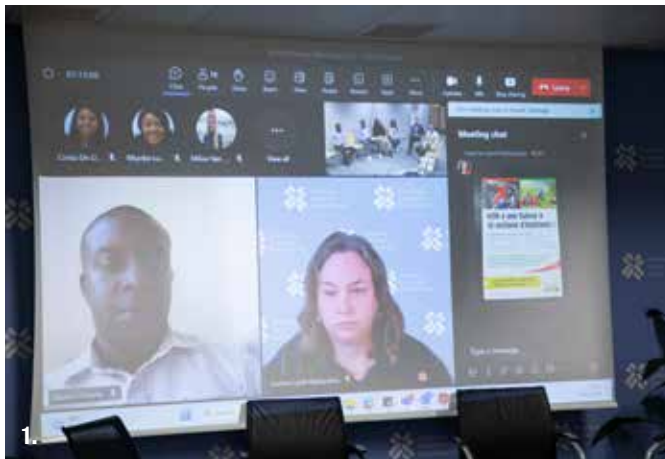
1.



2.

**1. Practicing responsible data management** **2. Mobile apps supporting better data security**





1. Black History Month session 2. The United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy

## Advancing diversity, inclusion, and equity

ITC's Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion (GDI) unit is multifaceted, encompassing efforts to promote gender equality, combat racism, support LGBTQI+ rights, improve disability inclusion, and underscore well-being. This work involves dispelling myths, building awareness, and providing training and resources so that ITC personnel have the skills and knowledge to foster a safe, supportive organizational culture.

To address these needs, the GDI unit implements a range of initiatives designed to promote diversity and equity across the organization. In 2023, these initiatives included panel discussions, workshops, and training sessions on gender equality, racial diversity, and LGBTQI+ rights.

In collaboration with the Innovation Lab, the GDI unit held training sessions on leveraging technology for accessibility, along with policy review labs to give a platform for ITC colleagues to share best practices and to give input towards policy updates. ITC also actively engages in advocacy efforts to promote diversity and inclusion internally and externally, such as through UN-wide collaboration with the Geneva Alliance Against Racism.

ITC's commitment to advancing inclusion and equity has yielded major results. For instance, the Women's Power Lunch and Staff Talks sessions highlighting racial and geographical diversity have improved internal awareness and understanding about why these efforts matter. Other major highlights from 2023 were the Code-Switching Session for Black History Month, as well as the World Mental Health Day event opened by Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton, the latter of which was organized in collaboration with the ITC Staff Council and the United Nations Office at Geneva Staff Counsellor's Office.

The GDI unit has also continued offering bystander behaviour training, GDI induction sessions for ITC newcomers, and annual training sessions for senior managers on inclusive leadership and advancing gender equality. These activities combined underscore ITC's dedication to supporting diverse perspectives and fostering a supportive workplace culture. These steps have drawn significant recognition within the UN system. For instance, ITC continues to achieve top compliance with the UN System-wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP 2.0), with 2023 results showing 94% compliance with the benchmarks set out in that plan, with a 65% exceeds expectations rating.

The latest UN Disability Inclusion Strategy report shows that ITC is making strong progress, with ITC addressing all but two indicators of the strategy, while meeting or surpassing requirements for 13 of them. The upcoming integration of a disability marker into ITC's projects shows our commitment to inclusivity and data-driven decision-making.

Looking ahead, ITC remains committed to prioritizing diversity and inclusion (D&I) in its policies, practices, and programmes, including through the recent establishment of mental health and well-being focal points. ITC will continue using the UN-SWAP and UNDIS frameworks to mainstream D&I within its corporate and programmatic work and to achieve a more inclusive workplace. ITC will also strengthen partnerships with external stakeholders to amplify its impact within and beyond the UN system.



1. ITC Executive Director with interns

## Human resource management

In 2023, HR continued investing in expanding ITC's technological capacity by implementing additional tools for performance management, learning, and feedback. For instance, following the implementation of the Inspira Recruitment module in 2022, HR rolled out in 2023 the Inspira Performance and Learning Management modules. These effective, user-friendly systems enable ITC personnel to complete performance appraisals and mandatory trainings in a timely way.

The new platform for collecting feedback applies highly confidential standards, helping ensure ITC personnel can give honest responses. The results from this feedback have informed an action plan to build personnel satisfaction. HR also provided 'just-in-time' trainings on performance management, including on creating workplans and establishing SMART goals, as well as preparing for mid-point and end-of cycle reviews and how to give and receive feedback.

Online learning is a key pillar of HR's work. Along with the existing corporate subscription to the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) learning platform, HR makes it possible for personnel to use LinkedIn-Learning for professional development. The most popular content that staff engaged in during 2023 was artificial intelligence, including how AI could boost productivity and maximize efficiency in project management and data analysis. HR also organised HR Talks on topics such as AI through the lens of diversity and inclusion, coping with stress, preparing a great application, giving a clear and constructive no, and HR matters overall.

With a focus on career support, HR continued extending to staff the possibility of joining the UN Together mentoring programme, while providing individual career consultations on career planning, application reviews, and mock interviews.

HR continued its coordination with the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services to provide training on community civility, communication and conflict resolution and boundaries, boundary setting, and the art of saying 'no.' HR has further shared various channels and resources for grievances and reporting on its main portal, ensuring that all ITC personnel has access to this information.

For ITC's interns, these now receive a subsistence allowance, while ITC's Communications and Events team promotes the internship programme through its corporate social media channels. HR also provides sessions on their responsibilities vis-à-vis the Swiss authorities, as well as career development.



1. ITC Executive Director signing MOU with Absa Bank Kenya 2. ITC Executive Director signing MOU with Schneider Electric

## Partnerships

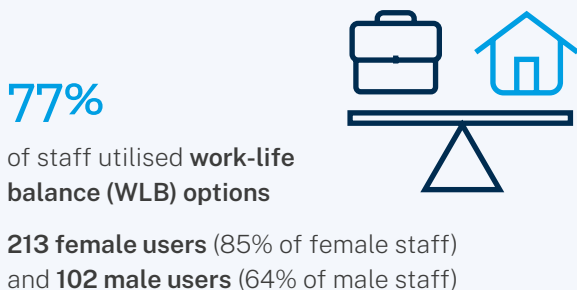
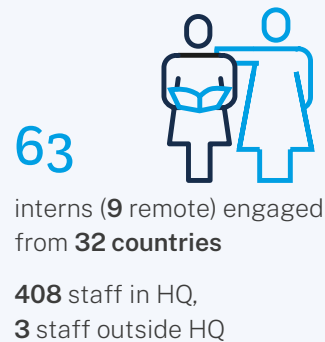
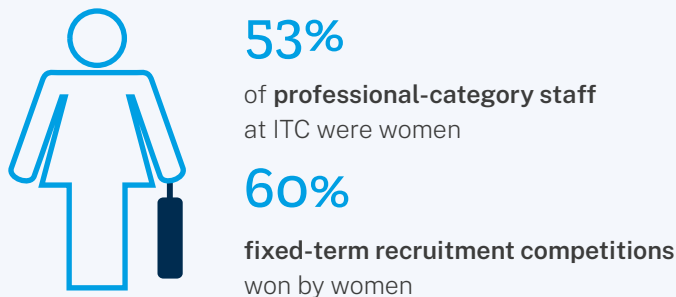
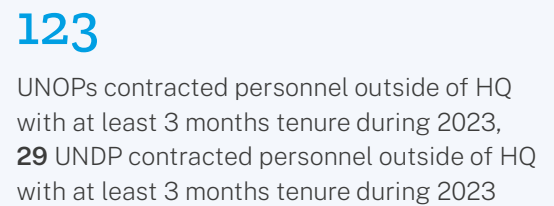
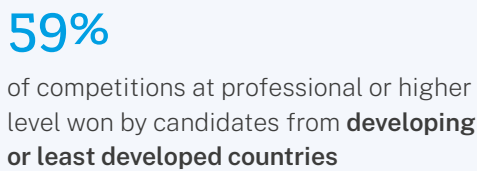
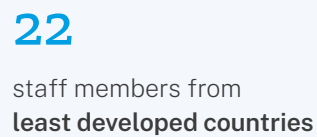
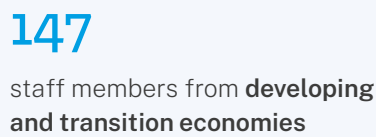
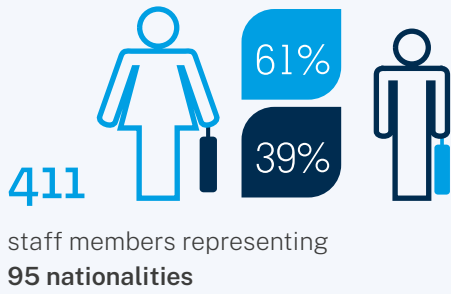
Over our past 60 years in operation, ITC's partnerships have been a continued source of pride and a critical ingredient for successful interventions. They're the reason our work responds to our beneficiaries' needs, circumstances and objectives and can deliver change that lasts. We have forged strong relationships, built on trust, both with fellow members of the UN system and with local institutions, the private sector, foundations and other actors who share our dedication to making trade more connected, sustainable and inclusive.

In 2023, ITC launched or renewed many such partnerships, with a few highlights shared below.

### Select 2023 partnership highlights

- ITC and the UPS Foundation are building out their longstanding work to support women entrepreneurs in the digital economy
- ITC and the International Coffee Organization (ICO) are partnering to roll out pilot projects in ICO member countries to train coffee producers in value addition, circular economy, sustainable production and climate resilience
- ITC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) are ramping up collaboration on regional integration in Eastern and Southern Africa
- ITC, Schneider Electric and Atelier21 are looking to increase number of labs with tools and resources that increase uptake of clean, efficient energy by MSMEs
- ITC and the African Union Commission are targeting inclusive trade in Africa by integrating small businesses into the regional economy, while working to promote sharing of trade information and intelligence through African Trade Observatory
- ITC, African Organisation for Standardisation have teamed up to support continent-wide work to establish a 'Made in Africa' label and promote regional standards in AfCFTA priority sectors and Eco Mark Africa label
- ITC and the United Nations World Food Programme work to build MSME competitiveness and efficiency in Iraq, focusing on supporting smallholder farmers with climate change adaptation, developing agribusiness alliances and strengthening food systems
- ITC and Absa Bank Zambia are joining forces to expand banking services for women
- ITC and Visa have teamed up to help build financial skills for youth-led MSMEs and e-commerce businesses in Africa
- ITC and Trade Finance Global undertook a media partnership for World Export Development Forum 2023, hosted by the Government of Mongolia
- ITC and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are partnering to support resilient, sustainable and inclusive global supply chains, with the active involvement of MSMEs, women and Indigenous Peoples

## ITC human resources by the numbers



\* More detailed HR figures are available online in Appendix II and III of this Annual Report.

\*\* The term “staff” includes personnel on temporary, fixed-term, continuing and permanent appointments, while the term “consultants and individual contractors” (CICs) refers to, respectively, consultants engaged by ITC in an advisory or consultative capacity or individual contractors providing particular support for given tasks or other short-term assignments.



1. ITC Innovation Lab's Agile Incubator 2023 2. ITC Innovation Fair 2023

## A banner year for innovation

ITC's Innovation Lab is now nearly a decade old and continues to grow from strength to strength. Today, the Lab serves as a centralized space where members of the ITC community can identify good practices, replicate them in new contexts, and experiment further with the Lab's guidance and support. The results then feed into ITC's trade-related technical assistance, along with day-to-day practice within the organization.

Throughout 2023, the Innovation Lab built its activities around three pillars. The first was an agile innovation incubator, designed to pave the way for new products and processes. Under the incubator, the Lab held a competitive 'call for ideas,' and selected ideas then benefited with support using the lean startup methodology for solution development. The solutions were progressively integrated into ongoing projects.

Examples of solutions that grew under the incubator are the Jokkalante Market Platform, which helped make linkages to financial service providers easier via a WhatsApp bot for farmers and buyers in The Gambia. The Coffee Sustainability Map is another instance of an idea that benefited from incubator support, allowing for the development of an online platform mapping trends and changes in the coffee sector.

The second pillar was innovation capacity, which meant that the Lab held regular training sessions on innovation-related topics for ITC staff. The third pillar was innovation ecosystems and insights, which focused on ensuring that funders could see what the innovation incubator was leading to in practice.

This latter pillar also focused on helping translate the ideas and best practices emerging in the Lab into insights that could be used for trade-related technical assistance and ITC events. One of the key activities under this pillar were the 'Let's talk about AI' sessions held throughout the year on what AI could mean for ITC's work and how to use it responsibly.

By the numbers, the Lab held 12 trainings in 2023, with over 200 distinct participants in total. There were also 12 new facilitators, from across ITC's divisions, to host these trainings. Three of ITC's projects incorporated a Lab contribution, while 19 colleagues reported that their engagement with the Lab had helped them do their work differently.

One of the year's highlights was the Innovation Fair in October, which featured an entire afternoon dedicated to innovation-related success stories from ITC's work thus far and creative ideas for future work. Looking ahead to 2024, the Innovation Lab's activities are focusing on pilot design, such as potentially integrating disability inclusion components into SheTrades projects underway in Sierra Leone and Rwanda; capacity building, such as AI Literacy Sessions held with ITC's in-house AI advisor; and ecosystem building, such as the next edition of the Innovation Fair in July 2024.



1. Video recording in action at the 2023 WTO Public Forum

## Communications and outreach

Communications and outreach are essential for ITC's work, helping make the case to our target audiences why connected, sustainable, and inclusive trade is the way forward when it comes to delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals. Telling this story means adopting best-in-class communications practices, with a clear focus on impact.

From spotlighting individual entrepreneurs to spearheading major campaigns, from organizing large international events like WEDF to making ITC's message known at trade fairs and global conferences, ITC's Communications and Events team serves as the custodian of the organization's

messaging and strategy. It also plays a critical role in disseminating and promoting ITC's research, ranging from survey reports to flagship publications, as well as corporate documents and project documents.

The growth across the organization's corporate social media channels show that these efforts continue to deliver for both ITC and for the MSMEs that it serves, as the subsequent data shows. Compared with 2022, the subscribers to our different corporate channels increased significantly, as did viewers of our videos, which have become an integral component of ITC's approach to impact-driven storytelling:

Social media followers: **335,524**  
+15.9%



- Twitter: **+11.9%**
- Facebook: **+14.6%**
- LinkedIn: **+14.6%**
- Instagram: **+31.4%**

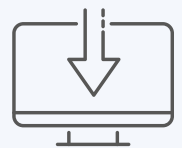
Video views: **532,471**  
+45%



### Website

- Views: **4,436,088**
- Users: **770,971**
- File downloads: **63,793\***

### Top 10 publication downloads in 2023:



1. The Coffee Guide, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition
2. Model contracts for Small Firms
3. BRICS Digital Economy Report 2022
4. Export Guide: Medicinal and Aromatic Ingredients and Plants
5. SME Competitiveness Outlook 2022: Connected Services, Competitive Businesses
6. Made by Africa
7. La Guía del Café, Cuarta edición
8. LDC Trade Report 2023-Improving Food Security
9. SME Competitiveness Outlook 2021: Empowering the Green Economy
10. Le Guide du Café, Quatrième édition

\* File downloads include publications, corporate documents such as annual reports, and project documents such as brochures.



## Financial overview and resource mobilization

The International Trade Centre functions administratively based on arrangements approved by the United Nations General Assembly in resolution 59/276. These arrangements provide ITC with a distinctive budget and administrative framework.

ITC is subject to the Financial Regulations and Rules and the Staff Regulations and Staff Rules of the United Nations, as well as the UN's oversight system. External, independent audit services are provided by the United Nations Board of Auditors (BOA) in compliance with the International Standards on Auditing. ITC's financial statements are certified by the United Nations Controller and submitted to the United Nations General Assembly together with the BOA report. Additionally, the ITC receives support from the UN's Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), which operates independently and has a distinct delegation of authority from the United Nations Secretary-General.

ITC's operations are supported by both the regular budget (RB) and extrabudgetary (XB) funding.

The regular budget, denominated in Swiss francs, is equally funded by the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Budgetary details are simultaneously shared with the United Nations General Assembly and the WTO General Council. Prior to approval by these governing bodies, the ITC's proposed programme of work, progress report, and budget are reviewed by member state representatives in several committees: the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, and the Fifth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, as well as the WTO Committee on Budget, Finance and Administration.

ITC secures additional resources to support its mission in conjunction with the RB funding. These XB contributions come from pledges by various entities, such as donor governments, governmental organizations, international bodies, and civil society, including NGOs, businesses, and foundations. Often spanning multiple years, commitments for XB contributions are outlined in the ITC Operational Plan, with oversight by ITC in line with the authority delegated by the United Nations Secretary-General. Their utilization adheres to the Financial Regulations and Rules of the United Nations.

ITC collects a program support cost (PSC) of up to 13% on XB expenditures, aiming to recoup the cost of additional indirect expenses accrued in facilitating project implementation. This PSC revenue is recognized at the time of the corresponding XB expenditure, not upon receipt of contributions. The PSC budget undergoes annual approval.

### KEY FINANCIAL DATA FOR 2023

- **\$159.34 million:** total value of new XB agreements signed in 2023 for projects running up to 2028 (2022: \$58.71 million)
- **\$166.81 million** in gross contributions received (2022: \$146.50 million)
- **\$257.92 million** in overall resources available in 2023, comprised of an opening balance of \$91.10 million and \$166.81 million as new contributions (2022: \$252.63 million)
- **\$162.41 million** in overall cumulative expenditure (2022: \$161.52 million)

**TABLE 1** Status of resources (\$ million gross) as of 31 December 2023

DESCRIPTION	OPENING BALANCE	NET INCOME RECEIVED *	EXPENDITURES	TOTAL CASH AT HAND
<b>Regular budget</b>	-	40.68	40.68	-
<b>Program support cost</b>	9.57	8.68	9.68	8.57
<b>Total extrabudgetary resources</b>	81.53	117.45	112.04	86.94
Extrabudgetary resources, Window I	11.08	10.58	12.78	8.88
Extrabudgetary resources, Window II	70.45	106.87	99.26	78.05
<b>Total</b>	<b>91.10</b>	<b>166.81</b>	<b>162.41</b>	<b>95.51</b>
<b>Overall resources available in 2023</b>				<b>257.92</b>

\* Net contribution including refunds to donors (\$0.219 million), excluding interest and transfers to operating reserves.

Table 1 highlights ITC's 2023 financial information, focusing on the regular budget, extrabudgetary resources, and the programme support account.

Signed agreements for voluntary contributions in 2023 have returned to the 2019 level, reaffirming funders' confidence in ITC's mandate. The contributions increased from \$58.71 million in 2022 to \$159.34 million in 2023, representing a 2.71-fold rise or an additional \$100.63 million. Extrabudgetary contributions received in 2023 grew by 18.1%, reaching \$117.45 million, compared to \$99.47 million in 2022. Total expenditure remained steady, with \$162.41 million in 2023 and \$161.52 million in 2022.

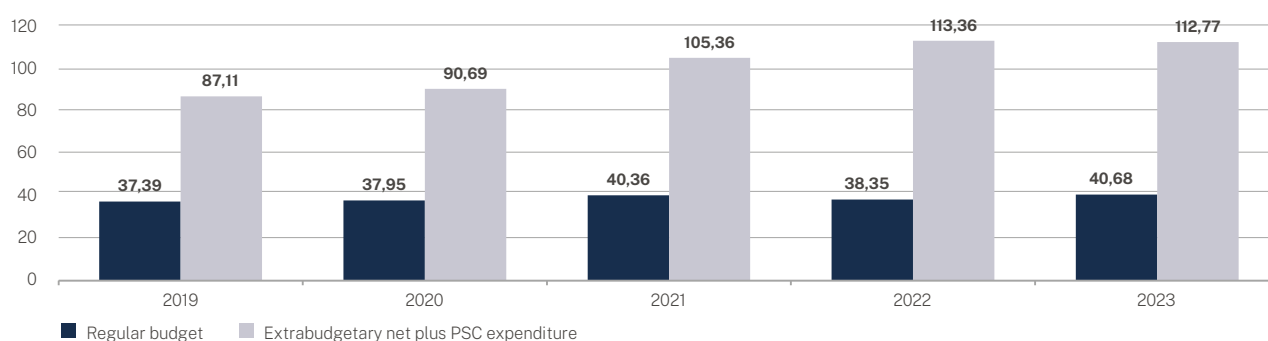
While the RB budget remained unchanged in Swiss francs, the expenditure in US dollars increased by 6.1% in 2023 compared to 2022. This rise was mainly due to the favorable exchange rate of the US dollar against the Swiss franc throughout the year. Overall, performance aligned with the output and outcome targets set for

2023, as further detailed in Figure 1, which shows the upward trend of RB and XB expenditures since 2019.

### Regular budget

ITC uses the RB contribution to fund: (i) developing and maintaining core expertise, expanding ITC's intangible assets, and enhancing key components of ITC's global public goods, including databases, tools, and publications; (ii) programme development, monitoring, and evaluation; and (iii) ITC core management and country coordination. The RB funding supports salaries and common staff expenditures for 160 positions, along with organizational operating costs.

The regular budget is adopted in Swiss francs, while contributions are received on a monthly basis and translated into US dollars at the United Nations operational rate of exchange at the date of the transaction. In 2023, RB expenditure amounted to \$40.68 million (2022: \$38.35 million).

**FIGURE 1** Expenditure pattern 2019–2023 (\$ million)

\* Table 1 shows gross XB expenditure of \$112.04 million, which includes PSC income earned when the related XB expenditure is incurred, while the amount of \$112.77 million in Figure 1 reflects net XB expenditure, including the portion of PSC that has been spent.



**TABLE 2** RB expenditure in 2023 (\$ million gross)\*

CATEGORIES	EXPENDITURE
Staff and other personnel costs	32.75
Operating and other direct costs	5.12
Contractual service	1.24
Equipment, vehicles, and furniture	0.67
Travel	0.65
Grants out	0.21
Supplies, commodities, and materials	0.05
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>40.68</b>
<b>Resources available</b>	<b>40.68</b>
<b>% of delivery</b>	<b>100%</b>

\* The RB is approved in Swiss francs. Amounts reported in the above table have been converted to US dollars to make the data easier to compare and to provide a comprehensive view of ITC's financial situation for accounting and reporting purposes.

## Extrabudgetary funds

As anticipated in the previous year, the voluntary contributions' portfolio increased in 2023 due to continued efforts to diversify and increase ITC's revenue sources. Signed agreements with donor governments, multilateral agencies, and international foundations amounted to \$159.3 million (2022: \$58.71 million).

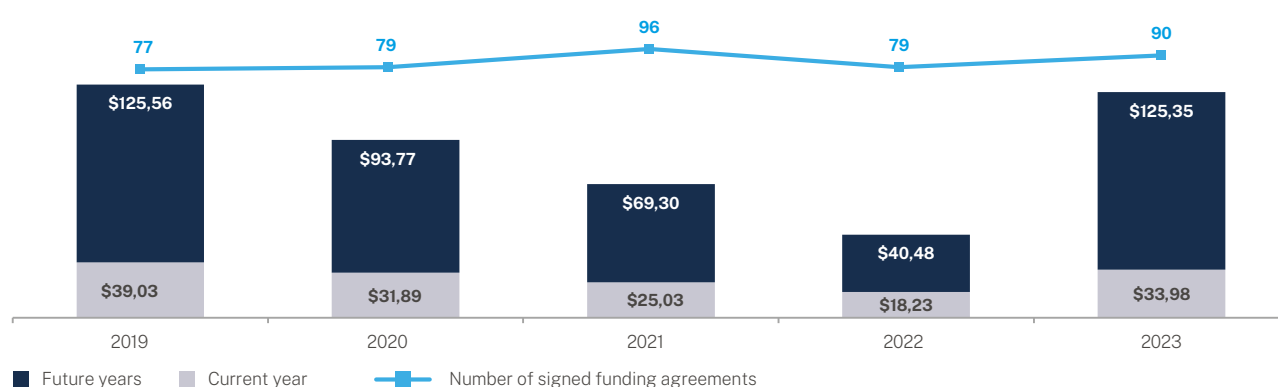
Voluntary contributions through donor agreements often cover multi-year periods, as they are usually committed for projects' lifetimes. This means that some contributions related to agreements signed in previous years are used for activities in the current year or in future years.

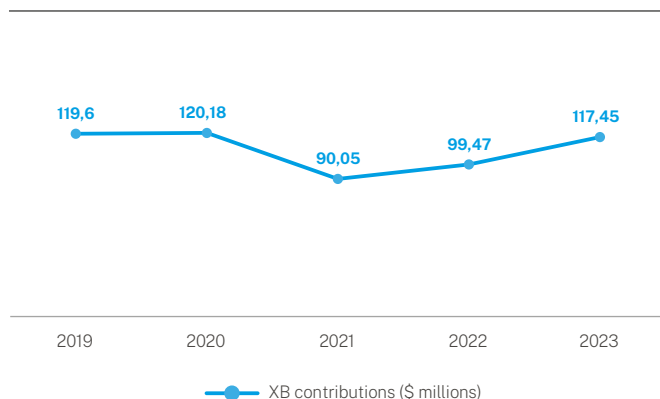
### TOTAL XB AVAILABLE RESOURCES IN 2023

#### INCLUDED:

- \$81.53 million carried forward from 2022
- \$117.45 million in gross contributions received in 2023

Figure 2 shows the evolution of voluntary contribution agreements signed in each year and the portion attributable to the current year and to future years. The contributors continue to form a diversified base: 11 funders each provided more than \$1 million, accounting for 93% of XB funding.

**FIGURE 2** Signed funding agreements 2019–2023 (\$ million)

**FIGURE 3** XB contributions 2019–2023 (\$ million)

In 2023, measured by US dollar expenditure, ITC delivered technical assistance, capacity building, and market intelligence with extrabudgetary expenditures of \$112.04 million. ITC maintained a hybrid approach to delivery, working with local implementing partners in the field and partnering with other UN agencies.

A total of \$285.81 million in XB funds has been secured for future years. This includes \$86.94 million carried forward for activities in 2023 due to the multi-year nature of ITC programmes, and \$198.87 million in remaining receivables from donors for technical cooperation projects.

### Unearmarked and soft-earmarked contributions

The ITC Trust Fund is divided into two “windows.” Window I is open to contributions that are corporate in nature and not for a specific project (unearmarked or soft earmarked at focus area, programme, or geographical level). Window II is open to contributions that are earmarked for specific, clearly identifiable projects, designed to meet pre-stated, time-limited objectives. They are implemented at country, regional, and interregional levels.

**TABLE 3** XB expenditure in 2023 (\$ million gross)

CATEGORIES	EXPENDITURE
Technical experts and other personnel	71.15
Travel	13.33
Operating and other direct costs	11.20
Transfers and grants issued to implementing partners	8.30
Contractual services	4.97
Equipment, vehicles, and furniture	2.38
Grants out	0.39
Supplies, commodities, and materials	0.31
<b>Total</b>	<b>112.04</b>

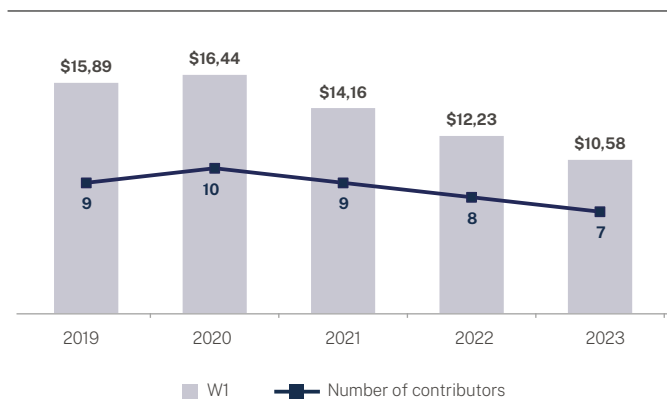
**FIGURE 4** Window I contributions 2019–2023 (\$ million)

Figure 4 illustrates the evolution of unearmarked and soft-earmarked (Window I) contributions in terms of the number of contributors and the total value of their contributions.

### Programme support account

An indirect cost recovery called a “programme support cost” is charged to extrabudgetary funds as a percentage of direct costs. This is to ensure that the additional costs of supporting activities financed from XB contributions are not borne by RB, while ensuring the necessary support is available.

In line with United Nations financial procedures, ITC charges standard PSC rates ranging from 7% to 13% on XB expenditures. This revenue covers indirect and incremental costs associated with XB projects, such as the central administration of human, financial, and information technology resources, as well as monitoring and oversight.

- \$8.68 million received in PSC income in 2023, in addition to \$9.57 million carried forward from 2022
- \$9.68 million in PSC expenditure
- \$8.57 million balance in the PSC account at the end of the year

In 2023, PSC resources continued to be used to fund additional staff to support programmatic delivery, as well as to fund cost-shared corporate initiatives by the United Nations Secretariat, along with the security and insurance of field staff. The primary focus was on achieving complete cost recovery for XB projects and ensuring that all direct operational and support expenses were integrated into XB project budgets. This approach aimed to reduce the likelihood of using RB resources to subsidize activities financed by XB funds.

### **Regular budget cycle and administrative arrangement for ITC**

The UN and the WTO secretariats conducted a joint review of the administrative arrangements set out for ITC with a view of proposing a suitable update to the United Nations General Assembly and the WTO General Council for consideration in 2024. The purpose of the update is to consolidate all of the changes that have occurred since administrative arrangements were revised in 2004, such as the fact that the United Nations introduced an annual budget while WTO maintains a biennial budget cycle, along with other practical applications of the administrative arrangements that have changed over the years.

### **IPSAS and ITC financial statements**

Since 2014, ITC has adhered to the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS) and has consistently received an unqualified audit opinion ever since. Effective 1 January 2023, ITC has implemented IPSAS 41: Financial instruments, which was issued by the International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board. In 2023, ITC received an unqualified audit opinion on its 2022 financial statements, confirming sound financial management practices and full compliance with IPSAS.



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