



Statement on UNCTAD XVI Conference “Shaping the Future: Driving Economic Transformation for Equitable, Inclusive and Sustainable Development”

23 October 2025, Geneva, Switzerland

The South Centre, as the intergovernmental organisation of developing countries, congratulates UNCTAD and its Member States on convening this sixteenth Conference under the theme “*Shaping the Future: Driving Economic Transformation for Equitable, Inclusive and Sustainable Development.*”

This Conference marks sixty-one years since the establishment of UNCTAD, an institution created to advance development-oriented international cooperation and promote the equitable integration of developing countries into the world economy.

Restoring Development-Centred Multilateralism

UNCTAD XVI takes place at a moment of profound strain on multilateralism and growing fragmentation in global economic relations. Deepening inequalities, unsustainable debt, climate crises, and unilateral trade measures continue to erode trust in international cooperation. For developing countries, recovery from successive global shocks remains fragile, constrained by limited fiscal space, rising capital costs, and restricted access to technology and markets.

An equitable and effective multilateral system must reflect the right of developing countries to participate in and shape the rules of global economic governance. It is a global public good essential to the stability and resilience of the world economy. The South Centre affirms that Special and Differential Treatment is a binding rule of the multilateral trading system, integral to its legal architecture and indispensable for fairness and effective participation.

UNCTAD’s integrated work across research, consensus-building, and technical cooperation in trade, finance, investment, technology and sustainable development remains vital to restoring balance between rights and obligations in the global economy. UNCTAD must remain anchored in its development mandate. Without it, the institution risks losing its direction and distinct contribution to the UN system.

The South Centre supports the renewed commitment in the draft outcome text to strengthen multilateral cooperation, prevent economic fragmentation, and build a fairer and more inclusive international economic order. We also encourage UNCTAD to enhance its work on assessing international net financial flows, including investment, development assistance, debt servicing, and the impact of unilateral coercive measures, to better inform policy coherence across global finance and trade.

UNCTAD XVI should reaffirm that South–South cooperation is a pillar of solidarity and a vital complement to North–South cooperation, grounded in equality, mutual benefit, and respect for sovereignty.

Trade, Structural Transformation and Policy Space

Trade is a means to achieve structural transformation and sustainable development. Developing countries need sufficient policy space to design and implement strategies for diversification, industrialisation, and value addition that reflect national priorities. This requires



addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers, ensuring equitable market access, and reforming global trade rules that entrench structural imbalances.

Developing countries are central actors in shaping the future of global trade through resilient South–South commerce and innovation. Strengthening regional and cross-regional value chains, coordinating industrial policies, and pooling technology and knowledge are essential for building productive capacity and collective resilience.

UNCTAD should deepen its analytical and technical work on the reform of the multilateral trading system to support developing Members in engaging effectively in WTO processes while upholding their right to development. The South Centre welcomes the recognition of development as the organising principle of the WTO and hopes this commitment will be retained in the final outcome.

We further encourage UNCTAD to expand its work on trade diversification, industrial strategy, and the links between trade, debt, and productive investment to reinforce policy coherence for sustainable and inclusive growth.

Digital Transformation and Data Governance for Development

Digitalisation is transforming trade, investment, and production worldwide. Yet for much of the Global South, the benefits remain uneven due to inadequate infrastructure, limited connectivity, high costs, and growing data asymmetries. Without fair multilateral rules on cross-border data flows and equitable access to digital infrastructure, technological progress will deepen dependency. Data should be treated as a sovereign resource and a global public good, governed with transparency, equity, and developmental purpose.

The South Centre commends the inclusion of the digital economy cluster in the negotiating text, which recognises both opportunity and risk. UNCTAD must continue to:

- Support developing countries through e-Trade Readiness Assessments and follow-up implementation.
- Deepen analytical work on digital trade agreements that promote inclusive digitalisation and preserve national policy space.
- Advance cooperation on data governance consistent with the Global Digital Compact and the work of the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development.
- Build capacity on artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, focusing on ethics, accountability, and inclusion.

The South Centre stands ready to assist developing countries in formulating national and regional digital industrial strategies that advance digital sovereignty, strengthen productive capacities, and align with the Global Digital Compact.

UNCTAD and South Centre's mission

As we mark six decades of UNCTAD, success of this Conference will be judged by the extent to which its outcome reaffirms and preserves the organisation's development mission and its unique role in shaping a fairer global economic order.

In performing its mandate, the South Centre will continue to serve as the policy and knowledge platform of the Global South, fostering collective action, strategic coherence, and promoting a united voice for a more equitable global digital and economic order.