

*Ambassador Nadia Theodore,*

*Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton,*

*Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala,*

*Secretary-General Rebeca Grynspan,*

*Excellencies,*

*Distinguished participants,*

*First of all, I would like to thank Ambassador Theodore for her warm welcome, and for her impressive work in chairing the JAG over the past year.*

*I am honored to be taking on this role as the Chair of ITC's Joint Advisory Group and look forward to our meeting today as we reflect on ITC's work for 2023, as described in its Annual Report.*

*Based on my interactions with ITC Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton, as well as her staff, I see that this organization continues to demonstrate its steadfast commitment to improving its impact and to streamlining its internal operations.*

*This commitment is translating to concrete results for the small businesses that are ITC's beneficiaries, as we'll be discussing throughout the day.*

*ITC's Annual Report 2023 has taken to heart what fragility has meant for small businesses, especially amid the outbreak and resurgence of conflicts and the continued damage caused by a changing climate.*

*These challenges, not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic and global economic upheaval, have affected all of our countries, particularly our small*



*businesses, and have put the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals at risk.*

*Addressing fragility is an important priority for my own country, Qatar. The Middle East and North Africa region is considered one of the world's most fragile, and that takes a heavy toll on our small businesses.*

*That's why we have recently launched the Women in Conflict Zones program through the Qatar Fund for Development, which blends humanitarian aid and developmental assistance and recognizes the challenges that women face in these settings.*

*Breaking the vicious cycle of fragility is no easy task, and as ITC's latest SME Competitiveness Outlook shows, it takes a cohesive effort that brings together small businesses, large private companies, local governments, development partners, and international agencies. No one actor can do it alone.*

*ITC's work in Iraq, through its project "Strengthening the Agriculture and Agri-Food Value Chain and Improving Trade Policy," or SAAVI, is a good example of what's possible when all of these actors come together. It also demonstrates ITC's deep commitment to partnerships and locally-led, locally-owned solutions.*

*SAAVI uses ITC's successful model of bringing agri-businesses together under alliances. Participating farmers have not only been able to improve their production processes, but have also connected with buyers and supermarkets, which means you can see products like Mosul-grown tomatoes at the Carrefour in Erbil.*

*Their products were also on full display at events like the Iraq National Trade Forum, and the “By Iraqi Hands” label is another key component of their success.*

*National policymakers, for their part, are making strong progress in their work towards Iraq’s WTO accession, including by undertaking the necessary domestic reforms. ITC is actively supporting these efforts.*

*That’s one example of the type of opportunities that ITC makes possible, alongside its partners.*

*I’d also like to highlight ITC’s commitment to inclusive trade, as Ambassador Theodore also described, which is clearly visible throughout ITC’s interventions.*

*An example of this commitment in action can be seen through the new grant program “She’s Next,” which ITC and Visa launched a year ago. It was designed exclusively for the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and it’s already drawn in over 800 applications from women-owned and women-led businesses throughout the region.*

*Since then, over 100 women entrepreneurs have taken part in customized virtual bootcamps covering topics such as access to funding, digitalization, e-commerce, and sustainability. In Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, 40 women entrepreneurs have taken part in technical workshops on topics like digitalization and business competitiveness.*

*And there is more work coming up, with the SheTrades Initiative and Visa, now planning further support to women and youth entrepreneurs in Kuwait and Qatar through a new curriculum covering everything from digitalization to*

*entrepreneurial development. They'll also be working with the Qatar Fintech Hub to empower Qatar's early-stage entrepreneurs and fintech startups.*

*Digital training and skills are important. But so is access to finance, which is another challenge that women entrepreneurs face—and one that can make the digital gender gap even more pronounced.*

*That's why we were glad to see the WTO and ITC launch the Women Exporters in the Digital Economy Fund (WEIDE) earlier this year ahead of the WTO's Thirteenth Ministerial Conference.*

*Its goal is to make it easier for women-led businesses to access the funding they need to improve their online presence and expand their trade opportunities. The Fund aims to raise \$50 million, with the United Arab Emirates already pledging \$5 million as the first inaugural donor.*

*I'd now like to look at the bigger picture of ITC's work and impact, to give us a fuller sense of what it's been able to achieve and why.*

*ITC worked in 144 countries last year alone—an impressive feat, and one that speaks to its profound commitment to connected, sustainable, and inclusive trade.*

*Three-quarters of these were priority countries, including 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 lapsing into conflict, and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It was just over a year ago that we had the honour of hosting the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries in Doha, one where the international community came together to support LDCs in moving “from potential to prosperity.*

*We now have a lot of work ahead of us to ensure the Doha Programme of Action delivers. That's why Qatar is excited to be engaging closely with ITC to ensure the voices of small businesses from these LDCs are heard, and that we all live up to what they expect from us.*

*The geographic reach is laudable in its own right. But the actual results on the ground are even more noteworthy.*

*In 2023, ITC helped 36,000 MSMEs improve their competitiveness and 11,000 transact international business.*

*ITC supported the development of over 100 trade-related policies, strategies and regulations to help MSMEs become more competitive.*

*Over 540,000 clients used ITC's global public goods, from its Sustainability Map to its Global Trade Helpdesk.*

*It's clear that ITC is not only delivering on its Strategic Plan 2022-2025 but is already laying the groundwork for even greater impact in the years to come.*

*As I conclude, I want to congratulate ITC on yet another major accomplishment: 60 years in operation. That's 60 years of helping countless people around the world reap the full benefits of trade, and of teaching us all what trade can look like when it's connected, sustainable, and inclusive.*

*We look forward to your official celebrations this Thursday, and we encourage ITC to hold fast to its commitment to making trade work for everyone's benefit, not just the few.*

*Before we continue with today's proceedings, I would like to refer to our agenda and remind you that the documents to be reviewed, the ITC's Annual Report 2023 and the Annual Evaluation Synthesis Report, are available on ITC's website. A few copies of both reports are available for people here in Room W.*

*For these reports or for any other assistance, please ask ITC staff at the back of the room. Interpretation is available in 3 languages: English, French, and Spanish.*

*When the floor opens for delegates to make their statements, a speakers' list will be shared. If you have not indicated when registering for the meeting that you would like to make a statement, please approach one of ITC's staff for assistance or send an email to [jag@intracen.org](mailto:jag@intracen.org) if you are online.*

*As per the proceedings of today's meeting, unless there are any objections, I will now proceed to adopt the agenda and invite Director-General of the WTO to take the floor.*