

Opening remarks by the Chair of the 55th session

Statement by the Chair of the 55th Session: H.E. Mr. Paul Bekkers, Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the WTO, Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva

Ambassador Athaliah Lesiba Molokomme,

Executive Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton

Director of the Office of the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mr. Pedro Moreno

Deputy Director-General, Mr. Xiangchen Zhang

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

I thank Ambassador Molokomme for her warm welcome, especially as a newcomer to the Geneva trade hub. I am honoured to chair this session of the ITC's Joint Advisory Group this year.

This meeting will review ITC's work over the course of 2020 as described within its 2020 Annual Report. As we know, this has been a very challenging period globally; the pandemic has claimed the lives of millions and devastated our global economy. It has led to job losses, bankruptcies, and forced entire economic sectors to contract dramatically, most notably tourism. While some countries are gradually recovering, others are still reeling in the wake of the pandemic.

In this dire situation, ITC has proven to be an important partner to small businesses across developing countries. It has been agile and adapted swiftly to the new way of working. It has mobilised and strengthened its platforms that enable online coaching, webinars, and e-learning. It has continued to provide useful information on trade restrictions and market opportunities.

I also applaud ITC's continued delivery of targeted support to MSMEs to weather the crisis.

ITC was among the first multilateral institutions to analyse the impact of the pandemic on MSMEs through its COVID-19 Business Impact Survey. Since then, ITC has launched new tools and strengthened existing ones, including the e-learning platform SME Trade Academy- which saw a record-breaking 100,000 participants in 2020.

Through such efforts, ITC has improved the competitiveness of over 21,000 Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in 2020 and we thank you for documenting these achievements in your Annual Report.

ITC was active in 128 countries. They placed acute focus on priority countries which included Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. These represented over 80% of the country-specific interventions, and further, LDCs accounted for 49% of these.

I welcome all of you to join me in congratulating ITC for its achievements throughout the last year and Executive-Director Pamela Coke-Hamilton for her able leadership after taking the helm of ITC against a challenging context.

Because of its impactful work and its ability to deliver in challenging settings, the Netherlands is pleased to be a partner in development with ITC. Just in September, we launched the Netherlands Trust Fund V programme with a \$15 million commitment over the next five years. We look forward to this expanding and deepening this collaboration.

Further, we invite other partners to continue investing in ITC. ITC's work demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the link between MSME competitiveness and its role in creating a more inclusive and sustainable economy. We therefore see an investment in ITC as a valuable contribution to our shared efforts to achieve the SDGs in this decade.

We face several global challenges that require global cooperation. From the looming threat of the climate crisis to the growth digital divide, there is a need for responsive technical assistance and swift reform. We must redouble our efforts to enable vulnerable populations to benefit from job and income opportunities.

ITC's commitment to this priority will help promote the participation of disadvantaged groups, including women and youth into global value chains.

Along this vein, we welcome the draft Strategic Plan presented by ITC which took into account the comments and considerations of external stakeholders. In this new Strategy, ITC will direct its focus on the three important areas of sustainability, digital technologies, and inclusiveness. This vision aligns with the future trends and forecasts for the global economy and our overarching objectives for sustainable development. We look forward to its finalization in December.

As per the proceedings of today's meeting, unless there are objections, I will now proceed to adopt the agenda and invite Deputy Secretary – General, Ms. Isabelle Durant, to deliver her statement.

Deputy Secretary-General, the floor is yours.