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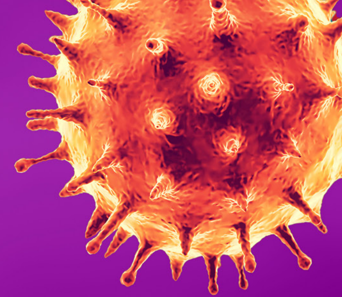

Trade × *Technology* beyond COVID-19: Leveraging Digital Technologies for Economic Co-operation

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1. Introduction

The global economy in the aftermath of COVID-19 will be significantly more digital. The outbreak of the pandemic accelerated uptake of innovative technology solutions for essential services, both cross-border and domestic. Working from home necessitated adoption of video conferencing; video classrooms replaced in-school learning; health care was delivered by tele-consultation and video outpatient appointments; even local businesses adopted e-transaction and e-payment solutions so that they could continue to supply essential goods and services. Adopting digital technologies was not optional but essential to sustaining economic activity during the pandemic. In effect, COVID-19 has redirected the global economy onto a long-term path predicated on the trade–technology nexus: *Trade* × *Technology* (Bajaj, 2020).

At the time of writing, more than 100 million people worldwide had tested positive for COVID-19, while more than 2 million people had lost their lives to it.[2] More than 18 million of these cases were reported from Commonwealth countries, with nearly 300,000 deaths and an average daily number of reported cases in excess of 85,000.[3] The complete or partial lockdowns that governments imposed to prevent the spread of the virus have had an unprecedented impact on economic activity, plummeting growth rates to an all-time low, and destroying jobs and livelihoods. The impact has been felt the hardest by developing countries—especially small states and least-developed countries (LDCs)—as well as micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), women-owned firms and young entrepreneurs.

Digital trade, including digitally enabled trade in goods and services by large firms and MSMEs alike, will be key to 'building back better' post-pandemic. While lockdowns brought the physical movement of goods and people to a standstill in some economies, many digitally enabled local firms and MSMEs were able to trade within the bounds of access to technology and capacity to use it. The accelerated adoption of technology in trade has 'reset' its role in building an inclusive, resilient global economy.

Two things have become clear as a consequence of this reset: first, going forward, the world will

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2 See WHO (2021).
3 See Commonwealth Innovation (2021).

be significantly more digital; second, the way out of the COVID-19 crisis depends on deeper, more inclusive and more effective economic co-operation. To this end, reversing the rapidly widening digital divide—the chasm between the connected and unconnected—is one of the most critical tasks in efforts to build back better that are predicated on technology. There is an urgent need for capacity building and technical co-operation to help to increase the effective participation of small states and LDCs—and, within them, MSMEs, women-owned businesses and young entrepreneurs—in global trade. This will mitigate the impact of future crises. It will demand policies and measures, and the sharing of best practices, which help to integrate these players into the digital economy, including through economic diversification and digitally tradable services. In this way, policymakers, both in the Commonwealth and globally, will more effectively leverage the power of the digital economy and digital trade in their post-COVID-19 economic recovery strategies.

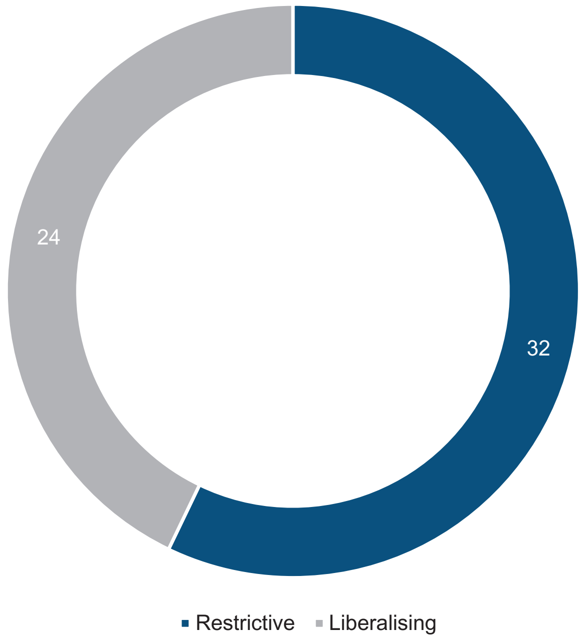
This issue of *Trade Hot Topics* provides a brief overview of how the pandemic has accelerated the uptake of digital technologies, and it proposes practical ways in which these technologies can enable trade recovery and help us to build a more inclusive world economy.

2. Trade policy and regulations in response to COVID-19

Digital technologies have both enabled and sustained economic activity during the pandemic. The initial response of most countries was to close borders and restrict movement of goods and persons. Countries implemented various trade-related measures to support their economies, including import and export prohibitions, stricter monitoring and regulation of foreign direct investment (FDI), licensing requirements and mandatory quarantine (Figures 1 and 2). However, over time, it became evident that one of the more effective responses to the crisis was to leverage technology, including digitalising trade and trade-related processes, for improved economic co-operation.

Some countries adopted trade-related measures pivoting around digital technologies and this allowed them to temporarily relax some regulatory requirements. This included relaxing authorisation and registration requirements, allowing remote inspection and using visual technology programs to substitute for site visits and customs hearings (e.g. in India), digitally verifying certificates (e.g. in India and Sri Lanka (WTO Committee on Trade Facilitation, (2020b)), and accepting soft copies of

Figure 1. Trade-related measures among Commonwealth member countries during COVID-19



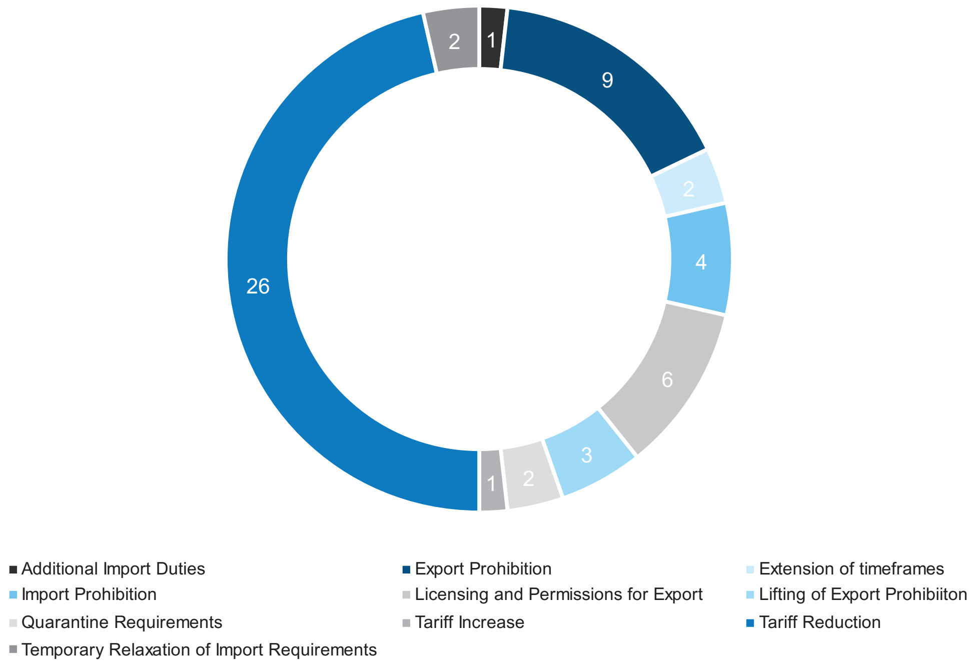
Source: Author's calculations based on Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (www.macmap.org).
Note: The International Trade Centre categorises Restrictive (additional import duties, import prohibitions, quarantine requirements, export prohibitions, and increases in tariffs) as those which have a restrictive effect on trade; and Liberalising (tariff reductions, lifting of export prohibitions, (temporary) relaxations in permissions and licensing, and extension of timeframes for visas, etc.), as those with a liberalising effect on trade.

documentation and e-paperwork (e.g. Canada's e-Longroom facility and the digitalised facilities of Singapore's National Single Window), as well as e-attestations and certification.

Many countries turned to regulatory co-operation with trading partners to expedite trade in essential goods and services, including mutual recognition of certificates from laboratories with similar regulatory frameworks. Many governments also embraced technology to deliver essential services or to support continued economic activity. This included relaxing regulatory requirements for tele-medicine and virtual medical consultation services (as well as digital prescriptions), tele-banking, tele-education, tele-trading, e-commerce and other IT-enabled services. Governments relaxed access to VoIP apps to facilitate working from home, online education, and administrative and governance functions. Data service providers and operators in both developed and developing countries (e.g. Kenya and Uganda) reduced mobile transaction costs, suspended data limits and boosted capacity at no additional cost. Governments supported the need for enhanced network capacity by issuing wireless network spectrum to operators (WTO, 2020c).

In many countries, government agencies actively encouraged consumers to use e-commerce,

Figure 2. Types of trade-related measure among Commonwealth member countries during COVID-19



Source: Author's calculations based on Market Access Map, International Trade Centre (www.macmap.org).

e-payment and e-banking facilities to meet their daily needs. Local governments in some African countries compiled the contact information of local co-ordinators for food products and circulated this, using social media and other such tools, to allow consumers to order groceries by phone (WTO, 2020b). Digitally enabled payment and logistics services completed these transactions. Public–private collaboration on data analytics fuelled digital applications based on artificial intelligence (AI) for contact tracing, aiming to contain the (rapid) spread of the virus.

Trade facilitation measures were also digitalised. India, for example, enabled the digital issuance of procedural clearances and e-certificates, expanding the scope of its online platform for preferential certificates of origin to cover all preferential trade agreements. Australia and Malta extended temporary work visas for some professionals employed in critical services, allowing them to remain in the country until it was safe to return home. Kenya fast-tracked the issuance of operating licences to service providers 'to extend availability of WIFI to remote locations' (WTO, 2020a).

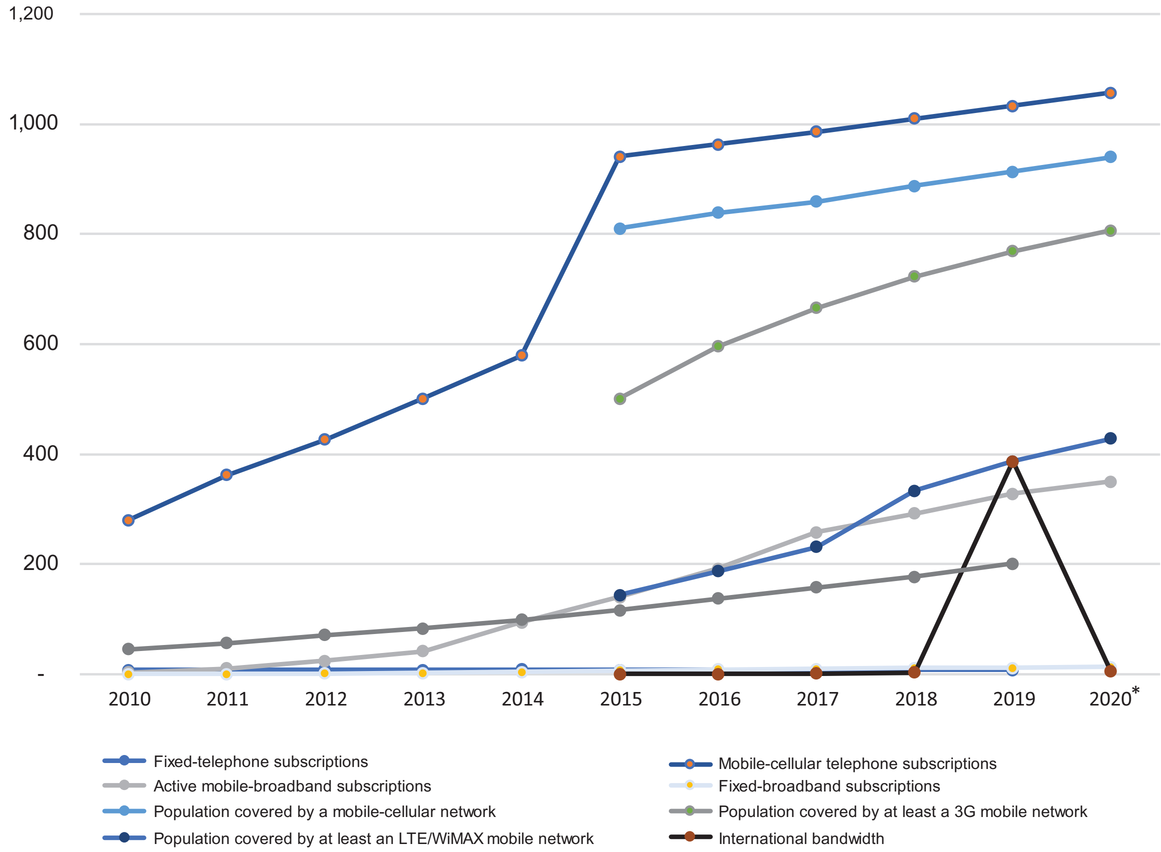
Those Commonwealth countries that belong to the World Trade Organization (WTO) conformed as far as possible with its information and notification requirements for those trade-related measures they put in place during the pandemic, ensuring that information was updated regularly, for ease of doing business (WTO, 2020a).

In July 2020, Commonwealth leaders also affirmed their commitment to keeping global supply chains open to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on trade, underscoring the role of transparency and access to information during the crisis. They evidenced a strong commitment to supporting developing countries, LDCs and small states in addressing their capacity constraints, by providing technical co-operation, sharing best practices, and facilitating inclusive economic co-operation and development (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020a). In the same vein, some WTO Members, including several Commonwealth countries (Australia, Canada, Chile, Kenya, New Zealand, Norway and Singapore) proposed the Trade and Health Initiative, aiming to use trade as a tool for recovery from the crisis, inviting WTO Members to collaborate on actions related to export restrictions, trade facilitation, technical regulations, tariffs, transparency and review (WTO General Council, 2020).

3. Commonwealth countries and the digital divide

There is a significant digital divide not only among Commonwealth countries but also globally. Figure 3 depicts the evolution of key ICT indicators for LDCs across the world from 2010 to 2020. While mobile-phone subscriptions in LDCs increased steadily during this time, as did the percentage of population covered by 3G mobile networks, surpassing both the penetration and rate of growth of fixed-telephone subscriptions, fixed broadband subscriptions remained consistently low and

Figure 3. Key ICT indicators for LDCs (totals and penetration rates, millions)



Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators database.

individuals' use of the Internet too remained low, rising only slowly. This may indicate an increasing uptake of and reliance on mobile phones as compared to fixed telephones. Similarly, Figure 4 indicates that the ICT indicators per 100 inhabitants remained significantly lower for LDCs relative to the world average and other country groups. This trend is echoed for Commonwealth member countries, the percentage of population using the Internet in LDCs such as Bangladesh, Kiribati and Malawi is much lower than that in other member countries (Figure 5).

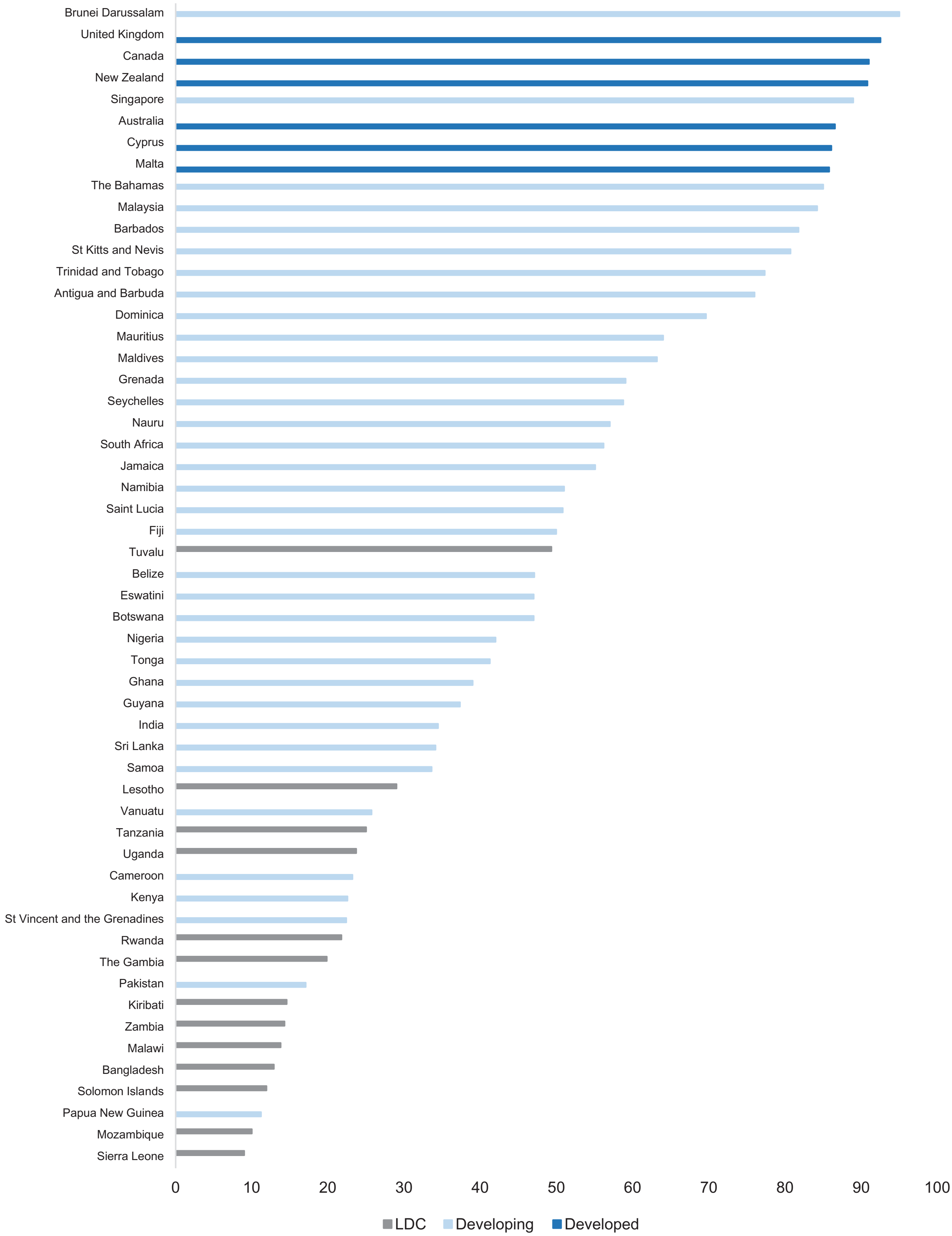
Whereas 85 per cent of the populations of high-income Commonwealth countries have access to the Internet, this figure is only around 18 per cent in low-income countries (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2020b). For LDC and small-state members, access to digital technologies, as well as the institutional and regulatory structures that enable and facilitate their uptake and adoption, remains critically lacking.

To ensure that digital technologies are adopted across the world, the international community must prioritise tackling the digital divide, which threatens to widen ever more rapidly. Indeed, within the Commonwealth itself, prioritising efforts to bridge the divide will have significant benefits not only for LDCs but also for *all* member countries. One study estimates that if all Commonwealth countries achieve a minimum level of broadband penetration of 50 per cent (the world average), then Commonwealth gross domestic product is expected to rise by between US$74 billion and $263 billion (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). Developing countries and LDCs will be well advised to focus on expanding mobile phone networks and reducing the cost of acquiring mobile phones in their efforts to bridge the digital divide.

4. Leveraging digital technologies for trade

The standout lesson from COVID-19 has been the urgency with which governments must tackle the digital divide, because this divide will widen ever more rapidly in a global economy that is significantly more digital. Bridging the divide includes ensuring effective access to markets, data and technology in equal measure. It is also important to ensure that the regulation of digital trade can be effectively implemented worldwide. This means that businesses, irrespective of size, scale or the level of development of the trading economy, must be able to comply with regulatory requirements. Bridging the divide also necessitates that economies and businesses have access to the same—or at

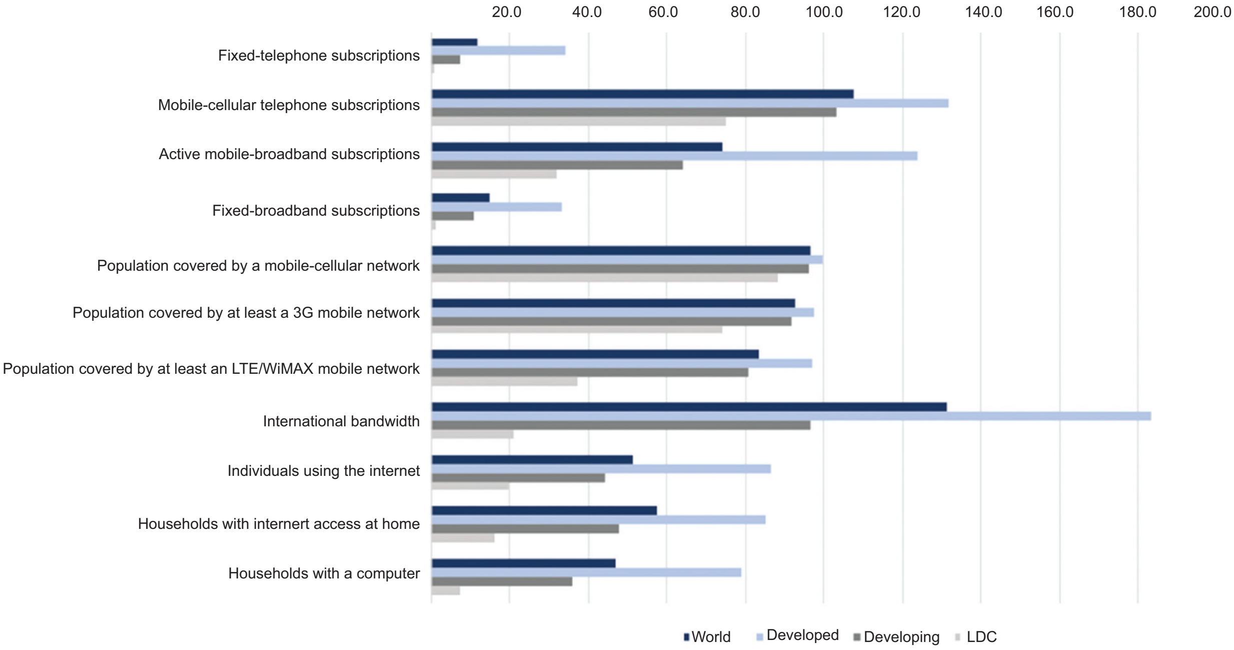
Figure 4. Access to the Internet among Commonwealth member countries and by group (% of population) 2019



Source: ITU Statistics (https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx).

least similar—technologies, so that these can be effectuated in trade across borders. For LDCs, this means co-operation in the forms of both financial assistance and knowledge transfer, including the sharing of technical expertise, towards capacity building. From a regulatory perspective, it also calls for co-operation between trading economies—essential if they are to arrive at minimum mutually acceptable standards built on trust and a shared regulatory confidence.

Figure 5. Key ICT indicators for developed and developing countries, LDCs and the world (per 100 inhabitants)



Source: Author's calculations based on ITU Statistics (www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx)

In this regard, the Commonwealth Leaders' Statement on COVID-19, issued in July 2020, set out member countries' commitment to building back more resilient and inclusive economies by harnessing economic co-operation. Achieving this means prioritising co-ordinated action to implement infrastructural, institutional and regulatory reforms, to enable and facilitate trade across Commonwealth members, pivoting on digital technologies.

Leveraging digital technologies in trade has made doing business easier, reduced trade costs and opened up markets to smaller businesses (especially in LDCs and small or landlocked economies), and it has provided these groups with the opportunities offered by newer business models built on adapted comparative advantage (WTO, 2018), as well as a technology–resource mix, towards a more diversified export-and-import basket. As countries and communities build back from the pandemic, it is important to effectively leverage digital technology—to leverage data analytics, AI, blockchain and the digitally enabled platform economy—towards deeper, more effective economic co-operation.

As countries work towards bridging the digital divide, it is also essential to acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all model will not provide optimal results. It will be necessary to account for the existing constraints faced by member countries and to phase in digital technologies in trade and trade facilitation, beginning with simpler ICT-enabled mobile-phone-based solutions, and hence lead into the functionalities offered by more advanced tools, such as AI, machine learning and cloud computing.

4.1 Digitalise trade facilitation

COVID-19 underscored the unequivocal benefits of digitalising customs and border procedures to reduce the time and costs of doing business across borders, as well as in minimising physical contact between traders and customs officials.

Co-operation among Commonwealth countries in leveraging digital technologies towards implementing the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) would be a natural and critical step towards building back better from the pandemic. Member countries would also benefit from co-operation in digitalising customs and border procedures, accepting e-signatures, smart contracts and digitised paperwork with geographic neutrality (including e-certification and assessment of rules of origin), culminating in and supporting the implementation of electronic single-window integrated facilities. This is necessary not only to crisis-proof trade facilitation protocols and reduce physical contact, but also to simplify border and customs procedures and reduce the associated costs and delays for business.

Collaborating on the development of hybrid solutions that combine the outcome of data analytics with the ability of blockchain—or distributed ledger technology (DLT)—solutions in tracing and recording the life cycle of a product or service would add significant value to ongoing initiatives in digitalising trade facilitation. For example, it could be helpful to profile commodities in transit by risk level to ensure that low-risk commodities can avoid lengthy, expensive border checks.

Technical co-operation in digitalising customs and border procedures and adopting available tools such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA),[4] which allow the electronic submission and exchange of trade-related data and documentation, would reduce the time and costs of moving goods across borders. Members would also benefit from co-operating on capacity building, to develop appropriate regulatory frameworks and collaborative models for public–private partnership for the feasible, secure and effective use of newer technologies such as blockchain (DLT) in tracing the product life cycle to facilitate transit procedures (Thompson, 2019).

4.2 Digitising and digitalising trade-related paperwork

Digitising and digitalising trade-related paperwork are fundamental to trade facilitation. To this end, Commonwealth members should co-operate on regulation that enables the (geographically neutral) acceptance of soft copies of documents and digitally input transaction data, on standardising the format of such paperwork and on engaging, via public–private collaboration, with online payment portals to collate trade and transaction data, with the end objective of feeding into single-window operations. The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records, which aims to 'enable the legal use of electronic transferable records both domestically and across borders' to improve 'speed and security of transmission, permitting the reuse of data and automating certain transactions through "smart contracts" ',[5] is one such tool.

Capacity building to help LDCs and small states adopt the tools available and to enable e-payments across borders would facilitate trade and support the more effective participation of these countries in the digital economy.

4.3 Digitalising the management of non-tariff barriers

Co-operation on leveraging technology to report, monitor, manage and eliminate non-tariff barriers (NTBs) affecting cross-border trade will be pivotal in ensuring effective access to markets. To this end, several Commonwealth countries, including Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda, can provide excellent examples of the use of digitally enabled platforms to eliminate NTBs. Commonwealth countries would benefit from collaborating to build such capacity across membership and collating such efforts at a regional—and potentially Commonwealth-wide—level.

4.4 Leveraging digital technologies for regulatory co-operation

Digitally enabled trade in goods and services depends critically on: the free flow of data over the Internet; the ability of stakeholders to trust each other, the medium and the security of their data; and the ability of regulation and legislation to uphold this trust. Digital trade regulation needs to achieve an optimal balance among these factors. Regulatory co-operation between member countries can be a significant step in this direction. While preserving the legitimate concerns of stakeholders, a 'trust-based data flows' model of co-operation would foster an enabling environment for digital trade, making it easier for vulnerable groups such as MSMEs, women-owned businesses and young entrepreneurs to participate more effectively, with better access to technology, data and markets.

To this end, 'rules as data' represents a relatively new, yet encouraging, concept (Atkinson, 2020). It holds that stakeholders, including the private sector, importers, exporters and intermediaries, for whom 'compliance with rules across goods codes and jurisdictions becomes based on agnostic commercial data', may benefit from the digital representation of 'rules data', which could simplify, modernise and harmonise trade and trade-related processes (Atkinson, 2020). This would foster a 'transparent and predictable Internet of Rules' and facilitate access to essential information on trade and trade regulation (Atkinson, 2020). The merits of such co-operation—leveraging digital

4 See https://asycuda.org/en/
5 See https://uncitral.un.org/en/texts/ecommerce/modellaw/electronic_transferable_records

technologies in trade in regulating e-payments and e-transactions to streamline and simplify e-payments, digitalised transactions and transferable records—are evident.

Platform solutions, digital repositories and blockchain can also be used to support co-operation on managing intellectual property rights (IPRs) and the mutual recognition of professional certifications and licences, in the furtherance of trade, especially in services (Fan and Gallaher, 2020; Ganne, 2018).

4.5 Leveraging digital technologies in the development and management of regional value chains

The varied levels of development and access to digital technologies within Commonwealth countries makes a convincing case for co-operation on digitalising regional value chains. This will be rooted in shared knowledge of data analytics, and utilising AI to assess and disseminate information on intermediate inputs into production value chains at various stages. In parallel, blockchain can be used for tracing product life cycles to facilitate digitalisation of customs and border processes, assessment and certification of rules of origin, and compliance with regulation. The inputs obtained from such analyses can also be made available to entities in less-connected areas using simpler ICT-enabled and mobile-phone-based technologies.

4.6 Co-operation in enabling e-commerce

COVID-19 has fuelled the uptake of e-commerce by firms and consumers alike. Local businesses and MSMEs—especially those who, until the lockdowns, had primarily brick-and-mortar operations—collaborated with large platforms to leverage technology and reach consumers. Consumers, while in lockdown, turned to online shopping for goods and services. Both private and public sectors adopted digital platforms to connect consumers and suppliers. The Africa Medical Supplies Platform is one example, enabling and facilitating essential trade during the pandemic. Launched by the African Union, the platform focuses on meeting requirements for essential medical goods, including personal protective equipment (PPE), by providing access for buyers to a database of African and global suppliers of such goods. It thus serves as an interface for 'volume aggregation, quota management, payment facilitation as well as logistics [and] transportation to ensure equitable [and] efficient access to critical supplies for African governments' (Africa Medical Supplies Platform, n.d.).

Yet, at the same time, the speed of delivery of goods was hampered by restrictions on physical contact and the movement of goods and people, highlighting the need for economic co-operation to facilitate digital trade. Engaging with the private sector, not only for trade but also in drafting trade policy and regulation, will be critical to expand the platforms, include vulnerable entities and, most importantly, build trust-based data flows. Efforts to expand the reach of e-commerce platforms, providing opportunities for businesses and access for consumers across Commonwealth member countries, would also benefit members. In addition, such collaborative efforts would help to inform member countries' engagement in ongoing discussions of e-commerce at the WTO.

4.7 Digitally enabled platforms for stakeholder engagement and economic co-operation

The digital economy is driven by the private sector, predicated on the scale, reach and financial muscle of large platforms, as well as the agility of MSMEs. Effective enabling regulation and interoperable, geographically neutral trade facilitation protocols and processes therefore require deeper, more engaged stakeholder input to harness innovative data- and technology-backed solutions that have the potential to simplify complex trade processes and comply with regulations. Such engagement is best achieved by leveraging technology; its pivot, the platform economy.

The private sector is increasingly using the platform economy to enable MSMEs to participate in digital trade, creating networking and commercial platforms on which MSMEs can transact, market themselves, and engage in business discussions and negotiations with consumers and complementary businesses, suppliers and providers of services for supply chain management, including logistics and insurance (Malini, 2019).

This suggests a model that governments might replicate and integrate. Platform-based ecosystems within which stakeholders connect among themselves and with relevant government channels to share experiences, challenges, success stories, policy recommendations and best practice, and address disputes (e.g. via digitally enabled arbitration), would benefit all stakeholders (i.e. consumers, businesses and policy-makers).

The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda is one such platform on which Commonwealth countries exchange best practices and experiences in trade and investment, and provide inputs for domestic reform—in particular, for participation in digital trade.[6] The initiative could also be of benefit if more advanced digital tools such as cloud computing and AI were leveraged in cataloguing, mining and analysing this data to provide better-informed and customised inputs to member states.

4.8 Building capacity for trade negotiations

Digital technologies built on AI and machine learning capabilities can help policy-makers and negotiators to simplify the analytics necessary for effective negotiation of trade agreements, as well as enhance the accuracy of such analytics. The recently launched United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Adviser (TINA) is an example of such a tool, which provides text analysis, partial equilibrium impact assessments for tariff liberalisation, impact assessments for LDC status graduation and tariff preference loss scenarios (UNESCAP, 2021). Collaborative efforts in furthering such tools would help developing countries and LDCs to identify their offensive and defensive interests, comparative advantages and the potential impact of trade agreements, building their capacity to participate more effectively in global trade.

4.9 Leveraging digital technologies to facilitate trade in services

The increased digitalisation of trade is partnered with a wide range of tradeable services. These include services traded directly (including digitally), services required for the digitalisation of trade (such as ICT and ICT-enabled services), services embedded in manufacturing and services necessary for economic activity in general (such as transport, distribution and logistics services). Facilitating trade in services is more critical today than ever before, but the role of services in economic activity complicates regulatory co-operation in the sector. In addition, the recent opening up to the private sector of the provision of services, including essential services, which were formerly reserved for the public sector has added another layer of complexity in regulation and regulatory co-operation. This is complicated yet further by the unresolved issue of data security regulation across trading economies—a critical step in the digital provision of services.

Nevertheless, digital technologies can facilitate co-operation between member countries in simplifying, modernising and harmonising the regulatory and institutional frameworks necessary for trade in services, and in tracking, cataloguing and navigating the increasingly complex web of services regulation across membership. In addition, digital technologies based on blockchain, AI and cloud computing can help to plug the gaps in collecting and analysing the (often hard to isolate) data on trade in services, and help countries to standardise definitions within trade in services, towards better regulatory co-operation. This will be supported by digital repositories and online arbitration for the management of IPRs in digital trade—in particular, in digitally traded services.

Digital technologies can also help member countries—especially developing countries and LDCs—to co-operate on building capacity for trade in services, including soft infrastructure and skills development, digital platforms the pivot on which information, best practices and technical assistance can be exchanged, as well as for stakeholder engagement on addressing barriers to trade.

4.10 Leveraging digital technology for capacity building

Enabling LDCs and small states to participate in the digital economy is a question of access to the digital medium and effective access to global markets. Such efforts require two types of economic co-operation and capacity building: first, investment in the necessary infrastructure, which includes co-ordinated and well-planned 'aid for trade' and donor funding; and second, technical assistance and knowledge transfer to build human resource capacity.

Access to the medium includes effective access to technological infrastructure, networks and information (including bandwidth, net neutrality and data), as well as to the digital economy and markets. The first of these is a matter of domestic reform and channelling investment effectively by mainstreaming digital capabilities in development policies. The LDCs are at a crucial point in their economic development whereby technology offers an opportunity to integrate with the global economy. Access to technology is key to LDCs leapfrogging into the mainstream digital economy. To this end, effective co-operation among Commonwealth members and well-structured, targeted 'aid for trade' and donor programmes—

6 See https://thecommonwealth.org/connectivity-agenda

leveraging technology—are needed. A combination of blockchain (for secure transactions and aid disbursement), data analytics on digital penetration and usage, and digital platforms, to ensure safer online payments, easier credit verification and hence access to credit for MSMEs, as well as digital tools for project and outcome management, would facilitate this process.

Effective access to global markets includes the ability to connect effectively with global digitally enabled supply chains and delivery models, directly with consumers and other businesses online, and with platforms and market opportunities, along with access to data (for analytics to support innovation and consumer servicing). This requires co-operation among member countries on digital platforms and digitally enabled dispute resolution mechanisms (especially on issues of competition policy). In addition, digital education and skills development for all stakeholders is imperative, to be enabled and sustained by e-learning and platform-based tools for knowledge exchange and technical co-operation.

5. Way forward

COVID-19 has underscored the relevance of *Trade × Technology* in building back a more inclusive and resilient global economy. It has highlighted that the vulnerabilities of the global economy are tied to the economic resilience of the least common denominator—the most vulnerable economic entities—on the far side of the digital divide.

The pandemic has also emphasised the role of the private sector in developing and harnessing digital technologies in trade, predicated on the scale and reach of large digital platforms, as well as the agility of MSMEs. It has also underlined the role to be played by public–private partnerships in moulding trade regulation in a significantly more digital global economy.

It is evident that a resilient, inclusive economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19 can be best achieved with deeper economic co-operation, pivoted on digital technologies, to ensure the collaboration of all stakeholders, including the private sector. This requires a level playing field for LDCs and landlocked or small states, and effective access to markets and opportunities in trade for MSMEs, women-owned businesses and young entrepreneurs.

Commonwealth member countries have an opportunity to build on the experience of measures adopted during the pandemic and to leverage digital technologies to facilitate intra-Commonwealth and global trade, as well as to support more effective participation of the most vulnerable countries in the global digital economy, utilising measures that bridge the digital divide and build capacity.

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International Trade Policy Section at the Commonwealth Secretariat

This Trade Hot Topic is brought out by the International Trade Policy (ITP) Section of the Trade Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which is the main intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth – an association of 54 independent countries, comprising large and small, developed and developing, landlocked and island economies – facilitating consultation and co-operation among member governments and countries in the common interest of their peoples and in the promotion of international consensus-building.

ITP is entrusted with the responsibilities of undertaking policy-oriented research and advocacy on trade and development issues and providing informed inputs into the related discourses involving Commonwealth members. The ITP approach is to scan the trade and development landscape for areas where orthodox approaches are ineffective or where there are public policy failures or gaps, and to seek heterodox approaches to address those. Its work plan is flexible to enable quick response to emerging issues in the international trading environment that impact particularly on highly vulnerable Commonwealth constituencies – least developed countries (LDCs), small states and sub-Saharan Africa.

Scope of ITP Work

ITP undertakes activities principally in three broad areas:

- It supports Commonwealth developing members in their negotiation of multilateral and regional trade agreements that promote development friendly outcomes, notably their economic growth through expanded trade.
- It conducts policy research, consultations and advocacy to increase understanding of the changing international trading environment and of policy options for successful adaptation.
- It contributes to the processes involving the multilateral and bilateral trade regimes that advance more beneficial participation of Commonwealth developing country members, particularly, small states and LDCs and sub-Saharan Africa.

ITP Recent Activities

ITP's most recent activities focus on assisting member states in their negotiations in the World Trade Organization and various regional trading arrangements, undertaking analytical research on a range of trade policy, emerging trade-related development issues, and supporting workshops/ dialogues for facilitating exchange of ideas, disseminating informed inputs, and consensus-building on issues of interest to Commonwealth members.

Selected Recent Meetings/Workshops Supported by ITP

29 January 2020: Looking to LDC V: A Critical Reflection by the LDV IV Monitor (in partnership with the OECD Development Centre and the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Bangladesh) held at Marlborough House, London, United Kingdom.

28 January 2020: Roundtable Discussion on Trade Shocks in the Commonwealth: Natural Disasters and LDC Graduation (in partnership with the Enhanced Integrated Framework) held at Marlborough House, London, United Kingdom.

11 October 2019: Tapping the Tourism Potential of Small Economies: A Transformative and InclusiveApproach (WTO Public Forum) held in Geneva, Switzerland in collaboration with the WTO and the UNWTO.

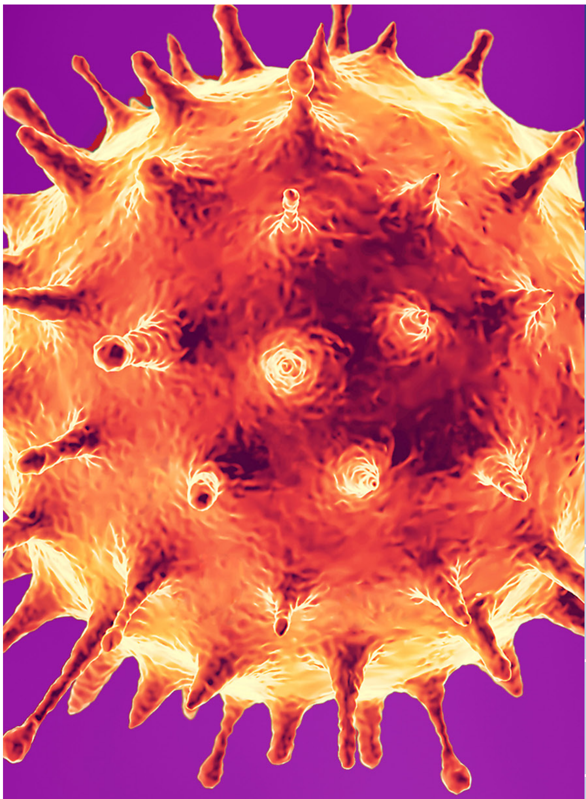
10 October 2019: Commonwealth Trade Ministers Meeting held at Marlborough House, London, United Kingdom.

26–27 September 2019: 12th South Asia Economic Summit XII: Shaping South Asia's Future in the Fourth Industrial Revolution held in Colombo, Sri Lanka in collaboration with The Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka

26 June 2019: Launch of the Commonwealth Publication 'WTO Reform: Reshaping Global Trade Governance for 21st Century Challenges,' held in Geneva, Switzerland.

28–30 May 2019: Harnessing Trade Policy for Global Integration: Commonwealth Consultation for the Asia-Pacific Region held in Singapore in collaboration with the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

4 April 2019: The Digital Economy: The Case of the Music Industry held in Geneva, Switzerland in collaboration with UNCTAD and the Government of Indonesia.



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