The 11th APTFF was organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in collaboration with the Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade of Uzbekistan, and in cooperation with the International Trade Centre.

The theme of APTFF 2024 was “Leveraging Digitalization for Sustainable Supply Chains” and brought together over 250 participants from more than 40 countries. As part of the opening session of the Forum, ESCAP and ADB launched the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Report 2024: Promoting Sustainability and Resilience in Global Value Chains. The report examines the progress of trade facilitation in Asia and the Pacific and recent trends in paperless trade, and evaluates the impact of trade facilitation initiatives on trade costs and overall trade. It highlights the increasingly important role of trade facilitation in ensuring more resilient and green supply chains, and emphasizes that digitalization in trade can be effective in enhancing global supply chain resilience and sustainability.

Focusing on the theme of the Forum, the high-level panel session discussed the role of trade digitalization in increasing sustainability of supply chains. The session presented specific examples of progress made in digitalization of trade procedures and related processes, while also highlighting various obstacles in achieving its full potential. The session reiterated that digitalization increases the efficiency of trade procedures, while also positively contributing to various aspects of sustainable development. Notably, however, barriers persist in digitalization efforts in lower-income economies, particularly with regard to the digital divide – for both skills and infrastructure – and extensive coordination requirements. Various efforts are being made by national governments as well as international organizations in addressing these barriers, but much remains to be done. The Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA) was identified as a useful tool in achieving sustainable development through digitalization, enabling inclusive implementation of paperless trade, and as an instrument to enhance and promote interoperability of systems through standardization such as those from UN/CEFACT.

Session 1 “Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation in Asia and the Pacific – Maximizing Impact for Development” drew insights from the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation and the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Report 2024, along with discussions by country representatives. Presentations by ESCAP and ADB shed
light on the existing progress and disparities in trade facilitation among Asia-Pacific countries, emphasizing the substantial potential cost reduction that is achievable through digitalization, and the need to incorporate sustainable measures. The synergies between digital and sustainable trade practices were particularly underscored during the presentations. Country representatives from India, Uzbekistan, Republic of Korea, and Malaysia shared success stories and challenges. Overall, the session provided a thorough overview of the opportunities and challenges associated with advancing digital and sustainable trade facilitation for development in the region.

Session 2 "Taste for Innovation: Essential Ingredients for Digital Trade Facilitation" highlighted the pivotal role of digital solutions in enhancing global trade efficiency, transparency, and security. Representatives from various countries and organizations shared insights on key trends and success factors for digitalization initiatives, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, legal frameworks, and inter-agency coordination. Speakers also discussed the significance of homegrown digital systems for sustainability, effective governance structures and forward-looking legal and regulatory frameworks. Moreover, the session addressed challenges in achieving interoperability, fragmentation, regional cooperation, and the recognition of digital certificates across borders. The session concluded with recommendations on the key ingredients for trade digitalization reform, such as holistic change management strategies, agile legal and regulatory frameworks, adherence to international standards for interoperability, effective governance structures and stronger post-implementation monitoring and feedback mechanisms.

Session 3 “Digitalization of Transit and Transport – Good Practices and Lessons Learned” discussed implementations of transport and transit digitalization and examined opportunities for future advancement. The session noted the importance of transport networks in supporting increasing trade and transport in Asia-Pacific and beyond, and highlighted the potential benefits that can be harnessed by digitalizing transit and transport. This was of relevance to all countries, but particularly so for countries in the Central Asian subregion, many of which are landlocked and face access, informational, infrastructural, and process challenges at their borders. Speakers shared good practices and tools that could be used to enhance transit, pointing in particular to the development of guiding principles and strategies, multimodal electronic cargo documentation, and incorporation of transit transport facilitation in existing electronic border systems.

Session 4 “Fostering Green and Inclusive Trade Facilitation and the Circular Economy through Digitalization” discussed integrating sustainable practices into trade facilitation, focusing on digitalizing trade procedures to reduce carbon footprints, thereby enhancing the greening of supply chains. The session highlighted the critical role of trade digitalization in improving transparency, efficiency, and the development of a circular economy. Discussions also covered specific initiatives such as green customs, green shipping corridors, UN/CEFACT tools and initiatives, and trade financing for compliance with environmental standards. Trade digitalization and data exchange were highlighted as instrumental for environmental goods trade facilitation, green transportation, and compliance with green non-tariff measures. The session also brought to attention the
importance of participating in and adhering to international standards and frameworks, such as e-CITES, the Basel Convention, and ePhyto, alongside the need for technical support and trade financing to enable stakeholders to better understand and adapt to evolving environmental regulations.

In Session 5 "Advancing Digitalization and the Way Forward – Institutional Initiatives and Support," experts from international, regional and developmental organizations came together to discuss innovative initiatives and support mechanisms for implementing digitalization in sustainable supply chains. The panelists stressed the significance of utilizing digital solutions to improve trade efficiency and sustainability, highlighting the importance of collaborative efforts, multi-stakeholder support of policies, and technical and financial assistance from developmental organizations to effectively drive digital transformation. Presentations covered various topics including e-commerce, sustainable supply chains, tech regulation, bilateral and regional cooperation, electronic corridor standards, and more. The session also emphasized the necessity of strategic planning and collaborative partnerships to tackle challenges and promote digitalization for sustainable supply chains.

Session 6 was dedicated to presentations by the four winners of the Asia-Pacific Trade Facilitation Innovation Awards 2024. The awards were given to cases which demonstrated implementation of innovative trade facilitation measures, such as by using digital means and channels, and with strong linkage to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The winners were: BIS Innovation Hub & Linklogis International for Project Dynamo; the Indonesia National Single Window Agency for its Single Submission Freight Transport Application (SSm); IQAX for its eBL service; and the CITES Secretariat for electronic CITES permitting systems.

19 capacity building and other side events were held back-to-back with the APTFF 2024. All programmes and presentations are available online. For details, please visit https://www.unescap.org/events/2024/asia-pacific-trade-facilitation-forum-2024.