

Trade x Technology
The Fulcrum of the New Normal

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Policy Brief

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Highlights

- The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified the critical *nexus* between trade and technology (*Trade x Technology*) in the global economy, and in response and recovery from crises, pivoted on the interplay between digitisation and effective cooperation.
- When the pandemic forced us to pause, *Trade x Technology* allowed life and work to continue, with e-commerce and videoconferencing taking essential goods, and services, such as telemedicine, e-learning, remote work, and jobs, to the last mile. The private sector harnessed the nexus, pivoted on large *platforms* to support the government efforts when it was most needed.
- The pandemic reiterated gaps in leveraging Trade x Technology - in access – to technology, as well as to effective opportunity; credibility and security of data and digital transactions; and predictability and ease of doing business – necessitating more evolved policy frameworks.
- The ‘new normal’ is going to be more ‘digital.’ *Building back better* and creating a more resilient global economy for the future requires revisiting frameworks for policy, regulation and economic cooperation – domestic, regional, and plurilateral to address impediments to the digital ‘*platform*’ economy.
- Policy and economic cooperation frameworks should ensure better leveraging of *Trade x Technology* so that continued economic activity, cooperation, and access to essentials, including at the last mile, becomes the ‘*automated crisis-response*’ going forward.
- The way forward - *collaboration* between old and new stakeholders, trading nations, as well as public and private sector, large and small enterprises, and rural and urban economic agents, towards technologically enabled trade facilitation, and effective digital trade regulation. Each stakeholder plays a critical role in the ecosystem, and must therefore, contribute similarly to defining frameworks for policy and regulation.
- The response to Covid-19 has put the spotlight on the *platform* for collaboration amongst old and new stakeholders, across geographies, to create trade frameworks leading to inclusive, robust, resilient global economy, predicated on ‘Trade x Technology’ – the ‘*Fulcrum*’ of the ‘*New Normal*.’

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Abbreviations

Covid19	2019 Novel Coronavirus Disease
DEPA	Digital Economy Partnership Agreement
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
EU	European Union
FAANG	Facebook Amazon Apple Netflix Google (Alphabet)
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
HRMIS	Human Resource Management Information System
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IP	Intellectual Property
LDC	Least Developed Country
MSME(s)	Micro Small and Medium (sized) Enterprise(s)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RTA	Regional Trade Agreement
TFA	WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference for Trade and Development
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Introduction

“No two forces are driving the global economic transformation more than technology and trade. Indeed, because economic openness encourages innovation, and vice versa, the two are not just related but mutually reinforcing....”¹

Covid-19 reinforced this message like no other event in history, accelerating adoption and acceptance of ‘Trade x Technology,’ amplifying the focus on making this nexus work better, and underscoring its role in building back an inclusive, enabled, resilient global economy, going forward. The ‘*new normal*’ will be pronouncedly more digital than pre-pandemic.

2020 has been an unusual year. A global pandemic, unprecedented ‘lockdowns,’ within and among nations, unparalleled slowdown of economic activity, travel and movement of goods. Covid-19 has amplified the critical nexus between trade and technology (‘*Trade x Technology*’), in responding to, and in *building back better* from the crisis. Digitally traded services and e-commerce kept the economy, livelihoods, and supply chains afloat when it was most needed, allowing for newer models of economic engagement, taking essential goods and services, including healthcare, learning, and even jobs, to the last mile. Videoconferencing mitigated lockdown of education and added ‘remote work’ to the global lexicon. Innovation, driven by the private sector, and supported by governments facilitating trade using technology, provided solutions when they were most needed. The nexus allowed us to continue, when the pandemic forced us to pause.

‘Trade x Technology,’ pivoted on cooperation, has emerged as the ‘*fulcrum*’ of the ‘*new normal*,’ and the key to building back an inclusive, resilient global economy. The digital economy enabled by this nexus, is driven by economies of scale of larger platforms, supported and predicated on newer engagement models provided by micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) which provide lightweight, niche services, via agile business models, plugging into global supply and value chains seamlessly. The digital economy operates on peer-to-peer exchange across large collaborative marketplaces (*platforms*), in cyberspace, pivoted on the *fulcrum* of Trade x Technology.

Covid-19 affirmed that this nexus will continue to be an enabler for the global economy, and against future shocks, proffering a ‘new normal’ in global supply chains – a critical interdependence between economies, and the ability for continued trade, and efficiently deploying technology, to respond to, and recover from, global crises. What started as a knee-jerk response by governments to an unprecedented health crisis and restrict movement of goods and people in and out of their countries, rapidly commutated to regulatory relaxations and trade facilitation measures to allow necessary economic activity, and the flow of essential goods and services. The pandemic underscored that an interplay between digitisation and effective cooperation was the only way out. Yet, the struggle to *adequately* leverage Trade x Technology was evident.

How can we restructure policy and economic cooperation frameworks to better leverage Trade x Technology so that continued economic activity, cooperation, and access to essentials, including to the last mile, becomes the ‘*automated crisis-response*’?

¹ WTO (2017) World Trade Report: Trade, Technology and Jobs, World Trade Organisation (https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/world_trade_report17_e.pdf)

Covid-19 vs. Trade x Technology: Lessons from Covid-19

As Trade x Technology evolves, management of digital infrastructure, network and bandwidth and the growth of the digital ‘platform’ economy, increasingly works on public-private-partnership models, leading to the emergence of supranational entities, such as data FAANGs ((Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Alphabet (Google)). Building these platforms, predicated on newer engagement models, and economies of scale and the financial muscle of these large enterprises, backed by micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) which provide commercial viability through their lightweight, niche services, and agility, plugging into global supply and value chains seamlessly. Ease-of-doing-business requires effective policy and regulation, dispute settlement mechanisms, and geo-political and economic cooperation towards trade facilitation and knowledge exchange between stakeholders across economies – provided by governments. Each stakeholder plays a critical role in driving the digital economy. Each stakeholder matters.

The pandemic also underscored the role, resilience, and resourcefulness of the private sector towards continuing ‘business as usual,’ in the most unhelpful circumstances. Throughout the pandemic, the private sector supported government initiatives to combat the crisis and its impact. The platform economy proved its utility via e-commerce platforms, platform-based contact-tracing solutions, telemedicine platforms brought together medical professionals across geographies, virtual conferencing brought the classroom home and facilitated work-from-home, social media platforms enabled consumer-outreach by small businesses, and essential messaging; and digital information platforms, both private and public, such as Covid-Visualiser, or the WHO WhatsApp solution, collated Covid-19 information in real-time, and broadcast advisory to mitigate panic-responses and misinformation.

The pace and ease with which these solutions were developed by students, businesses, governments, and international organisations, speaks to the capability of the platform economy built on Trade x Technology, pivoted on effective collaboration between large enterprises via digital platforms, and MSMEs. Inclusive, collaborative, enabling solutions, pivoted on platforms, when they were most needed.

Covid-19 caused unparalleled economic damage. As early as April 2020, the WTO had forecast a decline of 13-32% in economic activity.² At the same time, several countries saw a sharp increase in the growth of digitally-traded services, as well as a widening of their scope into what was traditionally considered brick-and-mortar businesses³ MSMEs in both manufacturing and services aided e-platforms in responding to requirements of essential goods and services. Yet, services and MSMEs were the worst affected sectors during Covid-19, with the complete shutdown of entire industries, as well as significant disruptions to supply chains as a result of disruptions to services ancillary to trade in goods (travel and logistics, for example), and those that create opportunities for trade in goods (such as sports and recreation, entertainment, etc.)⁴ Over half the MSMEs surveyed⁵ across a sample of countries, had shut down, or laid-off employees, and a majority of the others were anticipating the same fate. For some sectors such as travel, hospitality, and MSMEs in the provision of non-essentials, this was expected. For

² WTO (2020) Trade set to plunge as COVID-19 pandemic upends global economy, *Press/855PressRelease*, World Trade Organisation (WTO) (https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres20_e/pr855_e.htm)

³ WTO (2020b) Trade in Services in the Context of Covid-19, *Information Note*, World Trade Organisation (https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/services_report_e.pdf)

⁴ WTO (2020) Trade set to plunge as COVID-19 pandemic upends global economy, *Press/855PressRelease*, World Trade Organisation (WTO) (https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/pres20_e/pr855_e.htm)

⁵ WTO (2020c) Helping MSMEs Navigate the Covid-19 Crisis, *Information Note*, World Trade Organisation (WTO) (https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/msmes_report_e.pdf)

others, better integration with the platform economy could have mitigated the impact. In the digital economy, driven by MSMEs and services, this has raised questions on policy reforms needed to facilitate the integration of all stakeholders into the digital economy, to better leverage Trade x Technology to build back a more resilient global economy.

The three-pronged challenge of access – to technology, and to ‘effective opportunity’; credibility – of stakeholders, in the system; and predictability and ease of doing business, has impeded the nexus from doing more, and better, during the pandemic.

Policy frameworks for the digital economy should aim at creating an inclusive, enabling and resilient global economy, to the very last stakeholder. Existing models of cooperation need rethinking. Regulation should be outcome of real-time stakeholder collaboration over the digital platform with more inputs, case studies, and feedback from the private sector, and greater synergy between international regulation by governments and industry best practices determined by the private sector, both large and small enterprises, and freelancers of the ‘gig economy.’

The digital economy is peer-to-peer, inclusive, and enabling, built on a collaborative platform. The most obvious policy solutions to its challenges must mirror these characteristics. In the post-pandemic, significantly more digital ‘*new normal*’, deeper economic cooperation would help leverage Trade x Technology to serve as the ‘*fulcrum*’ towards an inclusive, resilient global economy; and parallelly, Trade x Technology, predicated on the platform economy, would enable deeper cooperation between large and small enterprises, rural and urban economies, public and private sector, and trading nations, and better-informed policymaking.

Leveraging the Fulcrum –Access. Credibility. Facilitation

While Trade x Technology was already a big part of our everyday life pre-pandemic, post-pandemic, not only will ‘*digital*’ aide global recovery, but the world will be defined by it. Therefore, addressing its impediments is critical to ensuring a resilient economy with least disruptions in times of crises.

Access

‘Access’ includes access to technological infrastructure; *effective access* to networks and information (including issues of access to bandwidth, net neutrality, and access to data); as well as effective access 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. Cooperation with trading partners, especially regionally, is also essential. LDCs are a prime example. LDCs are at a crucial point in their economic development where technology, pivoted on the platform economy is offering them an opportunity to integrate with the global economy in an unprecedented manner, and reshape their economies, pivoted on technology. Access to technology is key to leapfrogging LDCs into the mainstream digital economy, and the pandemic-induced timing is ripe for reforms.

The second and third issues of ‘*effective access*,’ are more complex, and in many ways, interconnected. This includes the ability to connect effectively to global digitally-enabled supply chains, and delivery models, and to connect directly to consumers and other businesses, online, to platforms and to effective market opportunities; access to data, including for analytics towards better service-provision, as well as access to knowledge and innovation. In addition, and critically, it is a function of digital education and skill-development for all stakeholders. All of this is particularly true for MSMEs and local businesses, who have displayed the ability to service consumers even during complete lockdowns, and yet, who often operate in the unorganised sector, with little connect to the organised digitally-enabled platform economy, reeling under anti-competitive practices of larger enterprises, the often unreasonable or untenable conditions of participation on larger platforms, and the lack of sufficiently skilled employees, or capacity to invest in skill development.

Large platforms such as the data FAANGs are constantly and rapidly disrupting the world of business and commerce. These supranational entities operate across geographies, acting as virtual monopolies, and ride above and beyond the reach of national and multilateral frameworks. In the absence of effective regulation, they have become synonymous with Charles Handy’s ‘elephants,’⁶ “...big corporations...both richer and more powerful than many nation states...are accountable to no-one...The elephants, people feel, are out of control.” If large platforms are Handy’s elephants today, the ‘fleas’ are the numerous smaller, more agile suppliers of lightweight, niche offerings, who play a significant role in driving digital platforms. Regulation needs to ensure that the ‘fleas’ are not denied ‘effective access’ to the digital economy by the uncontrolled dominance of the ‘elephants.’ This includes ‘automated’ regulatory ‘crisis-responses’ preventing market-dominance practices such as surge-pricing for data, and cherry-picking of MSMEs for access to platforms (in the name of quality control or optimizing bandwidth, for example), during crises.

Simultaneously, *equal* effective opportunity also requires that policy and regulation that prevents dominance by larger enterprises does not result in making those large enterprises and platforms, unsustainable. It is important to remember that there would be no platform economy without these large platforms. Each of these, larger platforms, smaller players, and the more ad-hoc participants of the ‘gig’ economy, are key stakeholders driving the digital economy, and collectively responsible for the merits of the platform economy during the pandemic. It is necessary for policy and regulation to ensure that they do not cancel each other on ‘*effective access*’ to the digital economy.

Equally critical to effective access to Trade x Technology is digital skill-development. This is essential, yet, remains a key gap for all stakeholders - employees, business owners, consumers, and policy makers. Rapidly evolving ‘employable skills’ required by the job-market are a challenge for educators and trainers. Content created for coursework today, is obsolete tomorrow. Large firms are struggling with simple tools like videoconferencing, MSMEs struggle, additionally, with the lack of capacity to invest in employee skill-development. Capacity building to address the skill gap; and developing globally relevant *standardized* content for digital skills for all sectors, and industries, are a precursor to effective opportunity.

⁶ Handy, Charles (2010) *The Elephant and the Flea: New Thinking for a New World*, pp. 80, *Penguin Publishing*

Security. Credibility.

The ability of stakeholders to trust the system, have access to credible information, better control (for consumers) over terms of digital end-user-license-agreements, data security (for businesses), especially for ‘work-from-home,’ and recourse to robust, effective dispute resolution mechanisms for breach of faith or warranties, is critical to the success of the system. When transactions happen across geographies, with nameless faceless entities, over a virtual medium, it becomes more significant to ensure credibility, good faith, and confidence in the medium.

This was evident during Covid-19, where even contact-tracing platforms put forth by governments, ‘verified’ e-payment services, and videoconferencing solutions that brought work home, were met with apprehension from users, in spite of their obvious merits in the situation, due to concerns over data security and fraud.

In 2020, nothing is un-hackable. If anything, efforts at regulating transactions, data and the ‘dark web’ have only added to the cost and complexity of doing business, without any tangible impact on their objectives. The fluidity of the medium, and the several micro-layers of services, providers and geographies, within each individual transaction, complicate policymaking. Furthermore, the digital economy depends critically on the seamless flow of data and information, and effortless transactions, over the Internet. Regulation that restricts that, is by nature, counterproductive.

The dichotomy makes a case to rethink policy frameworks for ensuring security online and building models beyond restricting the movement of data, information, financial transactions, and business models, and towards preventing misuse, mismanagement and misinformation, as well as creating a larger framework for more effective accountability. Localisation and ‘right to erasure’ don’t ensure data security, for example. Ensuring that ‘data processors’ can be held accountable across borders, does. At the same time, for the platform economy, addressing concerns of liability for platforms that cater to consumers and businesses across the globe, is also a subject of cross-jurisdictional negotiations, and still work in progress. The recent strike-down of the EU-US Privacy-Shield has also reiterated the debate between privacy and governments’ right to access data, emanating from national security.⁷ Similarly, when security on Twitter, one of the largest social-media platforms is compromised,⁸ should governments not be able to step in, cross-jurisdictionally, to protect consumer interests?

This makes ensuring digital security a key candidate for better cooperation between governments, including ensuring harmonisation, mutual recognition or at the very least interoperability of regulation, to address accountability, as well as allowing governments access to information, audit, and legal recourse for fraud or misuse, to protect legitimate national interests, across geographies. In fact, regulating data security, individually, *sans* regulatory cooperation, is by definition, flawed.

Of course, this would be a function of developing workable international standards for data security compliance, cybercrime, and digital fraud and harassment, which can only be

⁷ BBC (2020) EU-US Privacy Shield for data struck down by court, *Technology*, BBC News (<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53418898>)

⁸ Tidy, Joe (2020) Twitter hack: What went wrong and why it matters, *Technology*, BBC News (<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53428304>)

developed with inputs from the private sector, and by aligning policy frameworks with (private sector) industry best practices on management of digital information and transactions.

Awareness and Education

Nothing fosters confidence and informs effective policy and regulation, by bringing all stakeholders on the same page, better than capacity building in digital awareness and education. For consumers and for business, access to information, robust understanding of the digital economy and its possibilities and jargon, and an awareness of their rights and dispute settlement mechanisms, for example, is key. For businesses, information is predictability, and digital awareness and education will enhance productivity, and regulatory compliance. For policymakers, a deeper understanding of technology, its disruptions, its synergy with trade, and comprehensive, updated knowledge of industry best practices, challenges and case studies, is key to ensuring effective policy frameworks.

Digital Trade Facilitation

The ‘digital trade facilitation’ discussion has come a long way – with FTAs discussing paperless trade, acceptance of digital documentation and signatures, and harmonisation, mutual recognition and interoperability in various provisions. Covid-19 pushed the envelope. While the first response to Covid-19 was to restrict movement of goods and people, the need to resuscitate the economy, and supply of essential goods and services, necessitated and resulted in digitisation of border procedures, interoperability of customs compliances, mutual recognition in certification, relaxations in regulations for services such as telemedicine, and videoconferencing, and enhanced cooperation between governments in enabling the supply of essential goods and services. Sustaining momentum on digital trade facilitation, and using Covid-19 measures as an example of best practices going forward, will be critical to ‘*building back better.*’

Trade x Technology – The Economic Cooperation Challenge

Evidently, the need to address the access-credibility-facilitation challenge in digitally-enabled trade, to *build back better*, and to enable a resilient global economy for the future, makes a clear case for deeper, more effective cooperation between trading nations, large and small firms, and public and private sector. Digital transactions are cross-jurisdictional, often nameless and faceless, with inherent risks and regulatory challenges. Regulation that is bound by geography in its applicability, or operation, is redundant in an economy where every service provided online, every good traded via e-commerce portals, crosses multiple jurisdictions, virtually, in one single transaction. Zoom, CCAvenue, Airbnb and 3D-printing, are examples of the numerous microtransactions across several geographies that build the supply chain of a single service.

This is what complicates policymaking for the digital economy - it is predicated on services – traditionally a public-sector function controlled entirely by governments (with implications for national sovereignty), which has recently witnessed the evolution of public-private-partnership models in its provision. The tussle between public and private in trade in services remains

unresolved, making policymaking a sticky subject, and complicating economic cooperation between governments.

Therefore, convergence in FTAs on digital trade regulation remains superficial, at best. While the majority of existing FTAs touch upon the regulatory issues in digitally-enabled trade, these provisions differ in scope, coverage and depth.⁹ More recent agreements such as US-Japan and the proposed US-Kenya FTAs, or DEPA, for example, address cross-jurisdictional issues such as digital IP rights, competition law, and data security concerns. The language, however, varies between a simple statement of intent, and the recommendation to use ‘international standards,’ and ‘reasonable measures’.¹⁰ The effectiveness of such provisions remains feeble in the absence of clear *definitions* and well-defined international *standards* for the digital economy, especially for services – impossible minus effective public-private cooperation.

This is underscored by the fluid, dynamic, rapidly evolving nature of the digital economy, built on data-analytics and artificial intelligence, innovative niche services, newer business models. There is new jargon, new activities, new developments, every minute. Arriving at standards, definitions, and clarity, and ensuring it keeps pace with technology, requires innovative solutions built on inputs from all stakeholders- big and small, private and public, and trading economies.

The economic cooperation challenge is not just about the *language* of provisions in economic partnership agreements, but rather, impact – on their objectives, and on businesses - addressing definitions, standards, feasibility and interoperability – deriving from public-private-collaboration in policymaking, and deeper economic cooperation between trading nations.

The tool that suggests itself for such collaboration is the omnipresent, omnipotent ‘*platform*’ economy– the virtual hero of Covid-19.

Pivoting the Fulcrum on the Platform

Definitions, standards, access, security, facilitation, capacity building, skill-development, stakeholder awareness, deeper economic cooperation – the more time you spend working with Trade x Technology, the clearer it becomes that the ideal solution, whatever it is, has three key elements.

One. Public-Private Collaboration. Governments need to work in collaboration with the private sector – especially in developing policy and regulatory frameworks. Businesses today, use data-analytics to pre-empt our needs – offering us custom solutions to problems we didn’t even know we had. They create the future of service offerings and business models, on the go, evolving with and simultaneously, advancing technology. Policy and regulation impact them directly. For this reason, they are also the perfect candidates to pre-empt regulatory and implementation challenges, and potential impediments to doing business, that regulation may create. Their inputs are critical for universally acceptable policy, regulation, and economic cooperation between trading economies, towards an inclusive, resilient and enabling digital economy. At

⁹ Wu, Mark (2017) Digital Trade-Related Provisions in Regional Trade Agreements: Existing Models and Lessons for the Multilateral Trade System. *RTA Exchange*. Geneva: International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (<https://e15initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RTA-Exchange-Digital-Trade-Mark-Wu-Final-2.pdf>)

¹⁰ Wu, Mark (2017) Digital Trade-Related Provisions in Regional Trade Agreements: Existing Models and Lessons for the Multilateral Trade System. *RTA Exchange*. Geneva: International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (<https://e15initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RTA-Exchange-Digital-Trade-Mark-Wu-Final-2.pdf>)

the very least, international standards, especially in digitally-traded services, should derive from industry best practices, case studies and knowledge exchange.

Two. Rethink Inclusion. In the drafting of policy frameworks, it is standard to seek inputs from businesses. It is how we seek these inputs that needs rethinking. The financial muscle of the larger players and platforms finds a voice through political or industrial lobbying. Smaller voices, on the other hand, those of the start-ups, MSMEs, freelancers of the ‘gig economy’ and smaller ancillary service-providers, who drive the digital economy, are often unheard. Where industry bodies gather their inputs, membership is often restricted to those with the necessary financial means and geographical presence, and sample selection is non-transparent, and often non-inclusive, therefore, non-representative. For a medium that is evolving too rapidly for policy and regulation to keep pace, each of the agents driving the pace of this change must be heard. The noise on the digital platform must be collated into coherent voices that can inform policy better.

Three. Leverage the Platform – for collaboration, dispute settlement, stakeholder awareness, skill-development, and information dissemination.

Policy and regulation - domestic, regional or plurilateral, should be predicated on, and driven towards a model of deeper economic cooperation – forging an ecosystem enabling an amalgamation of the interests, offerings, challenges, knowledge and experience of all stakeholders, at the domestic level, converging into regional and plurilateral cooperation. The ‘elephant’ and ‘flea,’ supplier and consumer, regulator and regulated, must all speak the same language, access the same information, and work in tandem in the digital economy, because the (digital) platform economy necessitates, and benefits from such cooperation.

The *platform* is an omnipotent, omnipresent tool. Businesses rely on the platform to engage - with each other, and with consumers, to sell, innovate and collaborate. Large and small firms market their offerings on a combination of social and digital media, e-commerce and collaborative service platforms (Amazon, Apple, Netflix, for example), to cater to consumers. Search Engine Optimisation algorithms rely on linking and backlinking of businesses’ presence on various e-platforms. Businesses also harvest the platform to exchange case studies, knowledge and experiences, product or service enhancements, disruptions in industry best practices, and tools for addressing everyday business issues, and for online workshops, stakeholder education and awareness programmes, and access to updated, credible information.

The private sector is increasingly using the platform economy to enable MSMEs in digital trade by creating networking and commercial platforms where MSMEs can transact, market themselves, engage in business discussions and negotiations with consumers and complimentary businesses, suppliers and providers of services for supply chain management, including logistics and insurance, for example. What MSMEs lack in scale, these private-sector-enabled platforms make up for by aggregating demand, generating business enquiries, and connecting with ancillary services, crowd-funding aggregators, project management and ERP tools, etc. They connect those with business needs to those with solutions, allow exchange of experiences and challenges, and increasingly provide the additional service of vetting information and goods and services providers, as well as open communities for reviews, complaints, and feedback. Independent producers and freelance service providers connect with

mentors, business opportunities and skill development opportunities online.¹¹ Open-source communities develop, enhance, and market products, on well managed digital community fora, freely sharing innovation, ideas, and case studies, towards a better product/service for all.

This suggests itself as model for governments to both, replicate, as well as integrate with. Platform-based ecosystems for stakeholders to connect amongst themselves, and with relevant government channels, to share experiences, challenges, success stories, policy recommendations, what does/does not work, and to address disputes, for example, via digitally-enabled arbitration, would benefit every stakeholder – consumers, businesses and policymakers. Such platforms can be divided by sector, industry, size, etc., as long as they are, *one*, accessible to anyone with an internet connection; *two*, secured via accountability and governmental audits; and *three*, monitored by the government to ensure that key inputs from each of them can be collated onto larger databases, to feed-in to policy and regulation, at the national level, and coordinated into regional and plurilateral economic cooperation, towards better informed domestic and plurilateral policy frameworks.

In effect, governments can integrate with the private sector, and existing platforms to leverage the network and feed-in to larger, government administered platforms, with inputs and linkages with each of the private sector enabled platforms – instead of reinventing the wheel – put all the spokes together and create a sturdy, more reliable more inclusive and enabling wheel. The reach, coverage, and network of existing digital platforms, and knowledge within ‘big data,’ when combined with government-monitored processes to ensure deeper, more inclusive collaboration between stakeholders, can contribute significantly to policy. The UNESCAP regional cooperation hub, and OECD’s ‘Platform for Collaboration on Tax,’ are existing examples of using the platform to collaborate more effectively towards policy inputs, capacity building, and deeper economic cooperation. Parallely, the private sector benefits when such collaboration is harnessed towards better-informed, more effective, less restrictive policy and regulation, that addresses legitimate objectives without unnecessarily restricting trade.

Such better-informed policy frameworks will enable Trade x Technology towards *building back better* from Covid-19, a more shock-resistant global economy. The platforms themselves can double-up as tools for coordinated crisis responses between governments. A win-win, *for the platform, by the platform.*

Looking Ahead

The process of regulating digital trade resembles performing as an orchestra. Everyone must know their part well, and must perform it flawlessly, but perfect symphony eludes until each player listens to all others .

Covid-19 amplified that *Trade x Technology*, pivoted on the platform economy enabling deeper economic cooperation on access, credibility and facilitation, will serve as the *fulcrum* of the ‘*new normal.*’ The disruptions in world trade caused by Trade x Technology can only be

¹¹Goyal Malini (2019) How Smart MSMEs are Harnessing Digital Wave to Come out of Twin Shocks of GST and Note Ban, *ET Bureau*, Economic Times (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/sme-sector/how-smart-msmes-are-harnessing-the-digital-wave-to-come-out-of-twinshocks-of-gst-and-note-ban/articleshow/72200493.cms?from=mdr>)

resolved through the 'platform' enabling rapid and collaborative stakeholder-driven, therefore mutually acceptable choices - a platform that aids awareness, allows all stakeholders, old and new, to flag issues; addresses cross-jurisdictional dispute settlement, to obviate and mitigate litigation through advance agreements on vexing issues; and facilitates cooperation during Covid-19-like crises. Policy frameworks aimed at *building back better* will have to replicate attributes of the digital economy - cross-jurisdictional, collaborative, peer-to-peer, driven by the private sector, supported by government, *pivoted* on the *platform*.

Policy and economic cooperation frameworks informed by such collaboration will ensure that continued economic activity, cooperation, and access to essentials, including to the very last mile, predicated on *Trade x Technology*, becomes the '*automated crisis-response*' going forward.

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