

Foreword

Advances in digital technologies are changing what and how we trade, lowering barriers to internationalisation and fuelling the rise of e-commerce and borderless digital trade, diversifying the content of traded goods and services, and enabling new players to engage in international trade.

Digitalisation affords opportunities for our Commonwealth to build new industries, devise new ways to deliver better services, and enhance market access through digital trade. Advanced digital production technologies create new ways to accelerate innovation, boost productivity and raise the value-added content of goods produced in Commonwealth countries. More generally, the rise of the digital economy is creating new economic pathways, livelihoods and job opportunities that support inclusive and sustainable development across the Commonwealth. It also creates new avenues to expand the role of women in trade.

Harnessing these gains within the Commonwealth requires appropriate policies and regulatory approaches that allow individuals, entrepreneurs and businesses to capitalise fully on the opportunities provided by new digital technologies. It also requires effective policy responses to manage both the perceived and actual disruptive impacts on different segments of society.

Without attention to these issues, there is a real risk that significant proportions of the population in Commonwealth countries may be left behind by digitalisation and excluded from participating effectively in the digital economy. More generally, a lack of digital readiness in many Commonwealth countries – particularly developing members and small states – is exacerbating digital divides and threatening to marginalise some Commonwealth citizens from meaningful participation in the digital economy.

There is thus an urgent need to ensure that individuals, entrepreneurs and businesses across the Commonwealth have the ability to engage and compete effectively in the digital economy. This means considerable effort and resources need to be directed to developing digital infrastructure and foundational digital systems (such as digital identities or systems and platforms for processing digital payments), building digital skills, and creating a facilitative and enabling environment to adopt and absorb digital technologies and engage effectively in digital trade. Innovative regulatory frameworks and levers can also be employed to engender greater trust in digital systems and support digital inclusion, especially in terms of the use of digital technology by women.

The long-standing spirit of co-operation in the Commonwealth can play a major role in supporting our member countries to harness the benefits of the digital economy and deal with the inherent challenges posed by rapid digital transformation. By exchanging experiences, sharing knowledge and best practices, and enhancing capacity, we can collectively create the ecosystem where inclusive and sustainable national digital economies can develop, and ensure digital transformation benefits all segments of society across the Commonwealth. No other study has focused specifically on digitalisation in the Commonwealth. The study thus fills an important gap by providing new knowledge on the state of the digital economy in the Commonwealth, the challenges posed by digitalisation, and the opportunities available for Commonwealth members to harness the benefits of digitalisation for development and to boost intra-Commonwealth trade.

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Secretary-General of the Commonwealth