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Trade promotion organizations leadership dialogue

Executive summary of the dialogue outcomes
Roadmaps for excellence



Organised on the 22nd of
July 2025, as part of the ITC
Global SME Ministerial Meeting

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CONTEXT

The International Trade Centre (ITC), in partnership with the Republic of South Africa, hosted the inaugural **Global SME Ministerial Meeting** from 22 to 24 July 2025 in Johannesburg. This milestone event, taking place during South Africa's G20 presidency, brought together Ministers from around the world who are committed to empowering the millions of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that form the backbone of the global economy.

The Department of Small Business Development of South Africa partnered with ITC to co-host this inaugural Ministerial, which centred around the theme: "Navigating New Business Frontiers" focusing on how SMEs can drive economic transformation in their countries by enabling three key areas: access to finance, digital connectivity, green transition.

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For more information on the SME Ministerial, see: <https://www.intracen.org/news-and-events/events/global-sme-ministerial-meeting-2025>

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The TPO Leadership Dialogue

As part of this flagship event, the **Trade Promotion Organizations (TPO) Leadership Dialogue** convened a dynamic gathering of TPO leaders from across the globe. This high-level forum provided a unique space for peer-to-peer learning, collaborative problem-solving, and the exchange of real-world experiences. It also served as a catalyst for stronger alignment between TPOs and the evolving policy priorities of SME Ministers.

This year's Dialogue focused on how TPOs can adapt and lead in a rapidly changing environment. Through expert-led panel discussions, data-driven insights, and interactive roundtables, participants explored pressing global trade challenges and emerging opportunities—from fostering inclusive green growth to building innovation ecosystems. A key emphasis was placed on enhancing collaboration with SME Ministers to ensure that the voices of small businesses inform high-level policymaking.

What made this Dialogue especially significant is that its outcomes will directly feed into and shape the outcomes of the Global SME Ministerial—bringing TPO insights into the heart of the global policy conversation.

More than just a conversation, this Dialogue marked a **stepping stone toward more agile, inclusive, and impactful TPOs**—ready to navigate new business frontiers and support SMEs in seizing the opportunities of tomorrow.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report captures the **key insights, outcomes, and recommended actions** emerging from the TPO Leadership Dialogue. It aims to distill the rich discussions and strategic ideas shared throughout the day to support ongoing dialogue, drive follow-up actions, and contribute meaningfully to the Global SME Ministerial and beyond.

This report is organized into two main ROADMAPS, which synthesize the key ideas, perspectives, and takeaways that emerged from the roundtable discussions, expert panels, and case studies. Together, these roadmaps offer a comprehensive overview of the Dialogue's outcomes and provide two complementary types of insights as building blocks of these roadmaps:

- **Roadmap for TPO Excellence**

Recommendations to help leaders to future-proof their TPOs for agility, impact, and leadership in a rapidly evolving global trade environment

- **Roadmap for Greater Alignment and Collaboration between SME Ministers and TPOs**

Actionable insights to inform future collaboration for SME support among TPOs, SME ministers, SME agencies and policy leaders — ensuring more coherent and effective support to SMEs.

These roadmaps do not constitute all the elements of TPO excellence. There are many complex and interdependent set of behaviours, processes and strategies that drive TPO performance, set out in detail in [ITCs Benchmarking methodology](#) for business support organizations.

Instead, these roadmaps are designed to draw attention to the specific elements of performance that help TPOs prepare for and respond to uncertainty and change, deliver solutions that support inclusiveness and sustainability, capitalise on the digital transformation, and create multiplier impact for SMEs through ecosystem collaboration and alignment. They also present opportunities for TPOs to drive economic growth and diversification led by the internationalisation of innovative SMEs in tight collaboration with SME Ministers.

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ROADMAP 1 for TPO Excellence

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ROADMAP 1 for TPO Excellence

The role of Trade Promotion Organizations in economic development

With a combination of financial crises, a pandemic, wars, geopolitical tensions and unexpected tariff barriers, the last decade has defined a new normal where resilience and agility are critically important. For small businesses it is market agility, market diversification, value addition, unique intellectual property, and careful financial management that can improve resilience to trade related shocks. The same is true at a macro level, where governments need to manage the risk of trade disruption by hedging across multiple markets, building new trading relationships including with regional neighbours and global friends, reducing reliance on commodities, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, and managing a financial cushion to support the private sector.

Of course, the two perspectives are connected. More resilient firms build a more resilient nation, and effective support from governments helps to build firm level resilience in a self-reinforcing system. And to ensure that this systemic resilience is achieved, TPOs and similar business support organizations play a critical role as the trusted bridge between the private and public sector and the path finder into new markets for firms, sectors and nations.

TPOs can ensure that when small firms take risky steps into new markets or new products, they can access the knowledge and the networks to reduce the market entry risk and speed up success. In times of uncertainty or rapid change this support is even more important, and the benefit accrues not only to the firms that are directly served but also delivers a multiplier to the economy as a whole.

Trade promotion support given to firms generally improves firm revenue and profitability and has a positive effect on other firms in the supply chain, as well as on the local community. Export-led growth by multiple firms delivers macro-economic impact including increased foreign exchange, the diversification of market/product mixes, better and more innovative products, and the establishment of trading routes, relationships and brand awareness in target markets. The combined direct and indirect impact delivers a significant multiplier effect¹. The evidence is clear; the work of Trade Promotion Organizations matters to economic development.

About this roadmap

This roadmap is structured around the **three thematic sessions** of the TPO Leadership Dialogue, each capturing the central ideas, discussions, and strategic priorities raised during the event. It translates the Dialogue's insights into forward-looking recommendations that empower leaders to reimagine their TPOs as agile, impactful, and future-ready champions of global trade.

- Session 1: Championing Change
- Session 2: Delivering a Just and Inclusive Green Transition
- Session 3: Animating the Ecosystem

¹ See the University of Geneva report commissioned by Trade Promotion Europe



Session Insights

Session 1: Championing change

The first session explored the evolving role of TPOs in navigating fragility, disruption, and rapid change. Whether responding to geopolitical instability, supply chain shocks, or emerging global trends, TPOs are increasingly expected to act with speed, foresight, and resilience.

Evidence of the role of TPOs to build resilience, and foster digitalisation was backed up by the case study of Switzerland Global Enterprise and MATRADE Malaysia.

During the roundtable discussions, TPO leaders reflected on the core attributes needed to respond effectively to crises and change including the use of data and artificial intelligence to anticipate market shifts, as well as the importance of strengthening coordination with SME Ministers to align trade support with broader policy objectives.

The following section outlines the key takeaways and insights that emerged from this session.

TPO actions today to be a better change champion when it matters

1. Embrace digital capability and reduce barriers to digital access for SMEs
2. Build agility and crisis response into organizational strategies and operations
3. Invest in data collection and foresight
4. Be an early adopter and role model for firms
5. Nurture a customer centric culture and 2-way communications channels with firms
6. Build relationship capital with private and public sector

7. Embrace digital capability and reduce barriers to digital access for SMEs

To support SMEs effectively in volatile environments, TPOs must be digitally capable and forward-looking. Investing in centralized digital systems and artificial intelligence (AI) tools is no longer optional, it's essential. AI can enhance market intelligence, guide strategic decisions, and enable more effective SME engagement. As one participant put it: *"AI tools are essential—not to replace TPOs, but to make them smarter."*

TPOs must champion inclusive digital transformation by tackling the barriers that prevent SMEs from participating fully in digital trade, particularly costs, infrastructure gaps, and digital skill shortages.

They should support SMEs in building digital capabilities and facilitate access to affordable digital services, helping lower the cost barrier.

8. Build agility and crisis response into organizational strategies and operations

To respond effectively to rapid changes, TPOs must embed agility and crisis response into their core strategies and operations. Constant innovation and the ability to pivot quickly are critical for remaining relevant and resilient in uncertain times. TPOs must shift from reactive service providers to proactive change enablers.

9. Invest in data collection and foresight

TPOs should allocate dedicated resources to research, data analysis, and the development of strategic foresight. Leveraging AI, centralized knowledge platforms, and cross-institutional collaboration will enable them to anticipate trends and make informed decisions.

Foresight isn't just about predicting the future, it's about preparing for it. Robust data and insight capabilities position TPOs to support SMEs with timely, actionable guidance.

10. Be an early adopter and role model for firms

TPOs must lead by example in embracing innovation and new technologies. By being early adopters of emerging tools, especially in areas like digitalization, AI, and sustainability, they not only enhance their own effectiveness but also set a visible standard for the SMEs they support.

11. Nurture a customer centric culture and 2-way communications channels with firms

Staying in constant contact with SMEs is vital. TPOs must develop two-way communication channels to understand evolving needs and co-create solutions. Building trust through ongoing dialogue ensures services remain relevant and responsive, and these channels can be quickly activated in times of crisis. As one participant noted: *“Two-way communication builds trust and relevance—especially in times of disruption.”*

12. Build relationship capital with private and public sector

TPOs cannot operate in isolation. They must work closely with key ecosystem actors—including financial institutions, academic bodies, regulators, and other development partners—to create a cohesive support framework for SMEs. These partnerships amplify impact and help align trade promotion with broader economic development efforts. By investing in building relationships up front, when crisis hits, TPOs can draw on the relationship capital for a rapid and co-ordinated response.

Examples and resources

Tools & Resources	What is it about and Link
Learn from your Peers	
Global Cockpit Initiative – Switzerland Global Enterprise (S-GE)	Winner of the 2024 WTPO Award for Best Use of Information Technology , the Go Global Cockpit is a powerful platform that helps companies navigate international trade. It offers market analysis, business opportunity insights, export guides, and tailored support services. Learn more about how the Go Global Cockpit works .
Virtual Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS) - Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE)	Winner of the 2022 WTPO Award for Best Use of Information Technology , the virtual edition of the 17th Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS), organized by MATRADE, successfully connected thousands of global buyers and sellers in the halal industry. The event demonstrated the power of virtual platforms to expand market reach and create lasting impact. Learn more about MIHAS here .
ITC Tools and Global Public Goods	
From HEAD WINDS to TRADE WINS: A 90-Day Checklist for Trade Promotion Organizations facing global disruption	This practical checklist helps TPOs react quickly during crises and build long-term resilience and agility into their operations. It covers three key dimensions: understanding business needs, coordinating with stakeholders and ecosystem partners, and strengthening internal TPO operations—enabling fast, adaptive responses when disruptions occur.
WIPO IP Diagnostic and step by step guidance	A step-by-step tool helping SMEs assess their intellectual property needs and opportunities.
ITC’s global suite of Market Analysis Tools	Free, online access to up-to-date trade, market, and tariff data. These tools help identify export opportunities, analyse market access conditions, and make informed trade decisions. Access the Tools by clicking here
ITC Benchmarking for Trade	A digital benchmarking tool designed to measure and enhance the performance of both businesses and the organizations that support them. It also enables Trade Promotion Organizations (TPOs) to assess their digital readiness and identify areas for improvement. Register as a TPO to access the tools here .



Tracking progress

TPOs will know they are on track by measuring:

- Number of staff and businesses benefiting from skills development on digital technology
- Examples of data and foresight changing TPO practice and SME support
- Digitalisation readiness score from ITCs Benchmarking methodology
- Number and quality of risk management reviews
- Number of collaborations with SME support partners

Session 2: Delivering a Just and Inclusive Green Transition

This second session highlighted the growing importance of sustainability as a critical factor for the export-led growth of businesses and economies. As global markets increasingly demand environmentally and socially responsible goods and services, TPOs must ensure the businesses they support are equipped to meet these expectations.

Trade statistics highlighted the growth in environmental goods alongside the importance of green investment by firms for improved productivity. Global comparisons pointed to the importance of gender disaggregated data for the effective development of policies and support programmes for women. The case study reviewed the award-winning programme by Apex Brasil, from the perspective of award jury member, ZimTrade.

During roundtable discussions, TPO leaders explored how to integrate climate risk responses into their support strategies for SMEs. The climate crisis presents both physical and transitional risks—but also significant opportunities—for small businesses. Participants examined how TPOs are responding to both the risks and opportunities posed by climate change, and to what extent these actions align with the priorities and mandates of SME Ministers.

The following section outlines the key takeaways and insights that emerged from this session.

TPO actions today for a just and inclusive green transition

1. Access and deliver relevant technical and actionable knowledge
2. Capture new types of data on firms, including gender, age and climate vulnerability
3. Adapt your service offering for specific groups or green risks and opportunities
4. Amplify the voice of under-served groups
5. Refresh ecosystem partners
6. Model inclusion and sustainability in your own organization
7. Foster regional and cross-border collaboration on green standards

1. Access and deliver relevant technical and actionable knowledge

SMEs are willing to adapt, but they need targeted support. Many lack critical information on climate risks, compliance standards, and green market opportunities. TPOs must position themselves as educators and knowledge brokers, delivering targeted financial, educational, and technical guidance. As one participant noted: *“Despite the growing severity of the climate challenge, SMEs often still don’t understand the full implications.”*

The cost of compliance also remains a significant barrier. TPOs should work to lower financial and technical hurdles by facilitating access to incentives, green finance, and affordable compliance solutions.

2. Capture new types of data on firms, including gender, age and climate vulnerability

TPOs need to gather more nuanced data on SMEs including gender, age, climate vulnerability, and green readiness. This data enables tailored support and ensures resources reach the most vulnerable and high-potential firms.

3. Adapt your service offering for specific groups or green risks and opportunities

Generic approaches no longer suffice. TPOs must adapt their service offerings to address the needs of women-led businesses, youth entrepreneurs, rural enterprises, and informal firms. Customizing support for specific climate risks and green growth sectors will ensure no group is left behind in the transition.

4. Amplify the voice of under-served groups

TPOs should advocate for inclusive policymaking by actively elevating the voices of SMEs representing marginalized groups in sustainability dialogues and program design. Empowering these groups ensures more equitable and effective trade development.

5. Refresh ecosystem partners

Climate adaptation requires collaboration beyond traditional trade stakeholders. TPOs must broaden their partnerships to include actors in climate policy, renewable energy, education, and green finance. Multilateral and multisectoral cooperation are essential to building resilience.

6. Model inclusion and sustainability in your own organization

TPOs must lead by example. Embedding sustainability and inclusion into their own governance, operations, and service delivery reinforces credibility and trust. *“TPOs must walk the talk if they want firms to follow,”* one participant stressed.

7. Foster regional and cross-border collaboration on green standards

Fragmented regulations and inconsistent sustainability requirements across borders hinder SME participation in green trade. TPOs can play a vital role by advocating for harmonized standards and coordinated climate-smart initiatives across countries and regional blocs. As one participant put it: *“We need common platforms across countries to accelerate green compliance.”* Regional collaboration is key to driving reforestation, energy transition, and inclusive green growth.

Examples and resources

Tools & Resources	What is it about and Link
Learn from your Peers	
Women and International Business Program – Brazilian Trade and Investment Promotion Agency (ApexBrasil)	Winner of the 2024 WTPO Award for Best Initiative to ensure trade is inclusive and sustainable , ApexBrasil’s Women and International Business Program is reshaping Brazil’s trade ecosystem through a bold Gender Parity Commitment. With women now in 50% of senior roles, 100 staff engaged, and partnerships with 65 national and international institutions, the program is driving systemic change. In 2023 alone, it supported over 3,000 women-led companies—34% more than the year before—expanding first-time exporters and extending opportunities to vulnerable regions.
Eagles’ Nest Youth Incubator - ZimTrade	Winner of the 2022 WTPO Award for Best Initiative to ensure trade is inclusive and sustainable , the Eagles’ Nest Youth Incubator by ZimTrade helps move youth-led companies from the informal economy into formal markets and exports. Combining small business development with a reality TV contest, the program equips young entrepreneurs with skills, financing opportunities, and market linkages to unlock their export potential.
ITC Tools and Global Public Goods	
Agri-food Exports and Climate Change Guide	Practical guide to help Business Support Organizations assist agri-food SMEs in navigating climate-related export challenges.

Tools & Resources	What is it about and Link
Making trade promotion services work for women entrepreneurs – A practical guide	This guidebook is designed for TPOs seeking to make their services more inclusive for women entrepreneurs. It outlines concrete steps to mainstream gender in strategy, governance, operations, and service delivery. Drawing from ITC's experience with partners worldwide, the guidebook presents practical examples, institutional case studies, and actionable tools.
SME Trade Academy	An e-learning platform offering over 100 free online courses on trade and trade-related topics, from e-commerce to sustainability. Designed especially for learners in developing and least-developed countries, the courses are relevant for professionals in business, business-support organizations, and government agencies alike. Access the SME Trade Academy here .
Sustainability map	The world's largest database for sustainability standards. It provides free, accessible, comprehensive, verified and transparent information on over 300 standards for environmental protection, worker and labour rights, economic development, quality and food safety, as well as business ethics.



Tracking progress

TPOs will know if they are on track by measuring:

- Improvement in SME uptake of sustainability related policies and support services
- Increase in number of national or international collaborations in support of a just and inclusive green transition
- Percentage of satisfied users or net promoter score for new services to support a just and inclusive green transition
- Sustainability and gender mainstreaming score from ITCs Benchmarking methodology



Session 3: Animating the ecosystem

This session emphasized the critical role of networks and ecosystems in delivering effective business support. Successful TPOs activate ecosystems, connecting with partners that share common goals and bring complementary strengths. When done well, this creates a seamless experience for small businesses seeking solutions for growth and competitiveness.

A review of current ecosystem research identified characteristic of effective ecosystems and described the specific role of TPOs as connectors, convenors and champions. A panel discussion focusing on the South African ecosystem for access to finance revealed opportunities for more collaboration and new financial services providers.

To create strong networks of peers, by sharing their vision, their operating model and their challenges, the representatives of TPO regional networks set the scene for improved cross border connections among TPOs.

The following section summarizes the key insights and strategic takeaways from this session.

TPO actions today for a more connected ecosystem of business support

1. Manage mandate creep and avoid the ego-system
2. Actively seek new ecosystem partners for today's challenges and opportunities
3. Build shared services, measurement and reporting systems for shared attribution
4. Understand the user perspective
5. Seek opportunities for regional collaboration among TPOs

1. Manage mandate creep and avoid the ego-system

For an ecosystem to be effective both gaps and overlaps in the service offering need to be managed. This means looking at what is offered and to what targeted group to ensure that there are no gaps both in the offer itself, or in the groups that are targeted. Overlaps lead to inefficiencies, confusion and unnecessary competition. To resolve this, TPOs need to focus on what they do well, and partner for the rest.

2. Actively seek new ecosystem partners for today's challenges and opportunities

Using market intelligence and foresight tools, TPOs should consider what sort of new expertise and services SMEs will need and establish positive and actively managed relationships to reflect this. For example, as knowledge-based products and services grow in importance, TPOs should consider their ability to make effective referrals to experts and support agencies on intellectual property and branding.

3. Build shared services, measurement and reporting systems for shared attribution

To mitigate the risk of overlap and competition, to foster collaboration, and to offer efficient pathways for SMEs it may be helpful to formally create services that operate across multiple ecosystem actors, along with integrated results reporting, and shared attribution.

4. Understand the user perspective

The experience of a single user in an ecosystem is not static. As they grow, their needs change. This means that as well as understanding the connections among actors in an ecosystem of business support, it is also important to understand the specific user perspective as they navigate from different sources of information and support, especially as they transition from one target segment to another. For example, as a single SME transitions from a start up to an export ready firm, the referrals to new sources of support should provide a seamless experience.

5. Seek opportunities for regional collaboration among TPOs

The recent research by Trade Promotion Europe and University of Geneva, showed a halo effect of effective trade promotion for neighbouring countries. This means that there is no downside to collaboration with TPO peers. A number of regional networks of TPOs exist, with different models and structures that provide opportunities for peer learning and collaborative activities.

Examples and resources

Tools & Resources	What is it about and Link
Learn from your Peers	
Team France Export – Business France	Winner of the 2024 WTPO Award for Best use of partnerships , the Team France Export initiative provides one-stop shops in each of France’s 13 regions to support exporters, first-time exporters, and non-exporters. By uniting Business France, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and BPI France, the program has generated over 20,000 new exporters, €3.3 billion in export revenues, and 30,000 jobs between 2019 and 2022. Learn more here.
Export MAX III - JAMPRO	Winner of the 2022 WTPO Award for Best use of partnerships , JAMPRO’s Export Max programme builds the export capacity of Jamaica’s micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises through training, mentorship, financing, and market access. Now in its third round, the initiative has helped 50 companies expand into new markets, increase sales, and adopt sustainable practices despite global challenges.
ITC Tools and Global Public Goods	
Trade promotion, export growth and GDP: Fresh data and fresh insights	This paper presents updated evidence on the economic impact of TPOs, demonstrating that public investment in trade promotion yields significant returns in both export growth and GDP. Drawing on new research commissioned by Trade Promotion Europe, the findings confirm that TPO interventions not only benefit individual firms but also generate wider macroeconomic gains through strengthened supply chains, increased foreign exchange, and enhanced innovation.
Entrepreneurship Ecosystem in the Philippines Report	The report focuses on youth entrepreneurs, aiming to provide a thorough analysis of the current landscape. By identifying critical gaps in support systems and proposing actionable recommendations, the report seeks to foster an inclusive environment where young entrepreneurs can thrive, innovate, and contribute to sustained economic development.
Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Diagnostic in Uganda	This report provides a detailed analysis of Uganda’s entrepreneurship ecosystem —identifying strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement. Drawing on data and stakeholder consultations, it offers actionable recommendations for policy makers, support organizations, and private sector actors to foster a more enabling environment for entrepreneurs and small businesses in Uganda.



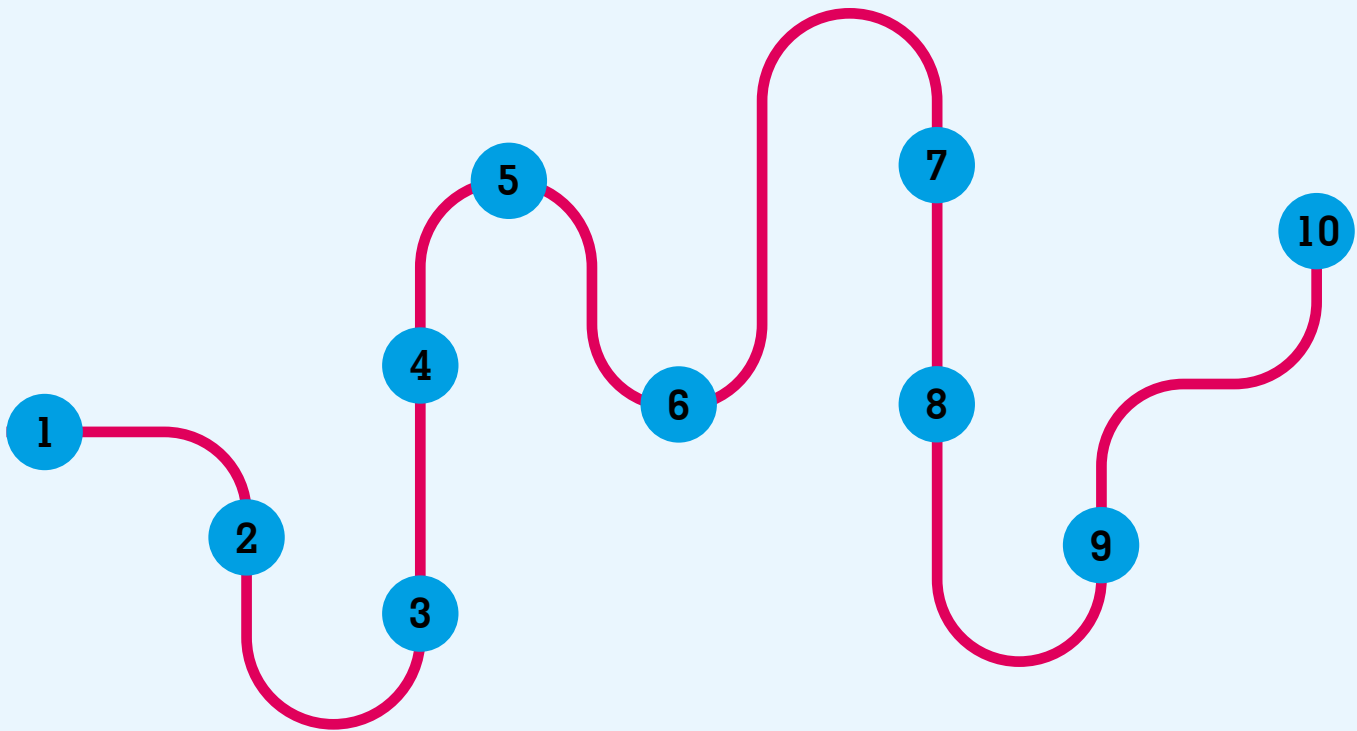
Tracking progress

TPOs will know if they are on track by measuring:

- Increase of actively managed formal collaborations with ecosystem actors or networks
- Density, centrality and betweenness scores of specific ecosystems
- Percentage of satisfied users or net promoter score for multi-actor services or referrals systems

Summary: ROADMAP 1 for TPO Excellence

These sessions covered just three of the challenges facing SMEs and TPOs. Nevertheless, the insights can be broadly applied to ensure that TPOs are future ready, agile and inclusive; delivering multiplier value to regions, nations, firms and communities. In the summary Roadmap 1 below, ten steps chart this path forward.



1 Identify **new competencies** to build or borrow, particularly on climate literacy and digital trade.

2 Invest in **foresight and data collection**, including gender disaggregated data, environmental and risk indicators.

3 Nurture a **customer-centric culture** and 2-way communications channels with firms

4 Expand and diversify **ecosystem partners** for today's challenges and opportunities

5 Build and manage **relationship capital** across sectors and borders for long term

6 Review **alignment of KPIs** with mandate, government objectives and programmes, and inclusion and sustainability priorities.

7 Understand and **focus on what you do well**, and partner for the rest

8 Build **agility and crisis response** into strategies and operations

9 Adapt **service offering** for specific groups or emerging risks and opportunities

10 Reconsider **risk appetite** as key to navigating uncertainty and growth

ROADMAP 2 for Greater Alignment and Collaboration between SME Ministers and TPOs

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ROADMAP 2 for Greater Alignment and Collaboration between SME Ministers and TPOs

The opportunity to align trade promotion and SME development

The opportunity and the imperative for SMEs to access global markets is growing, tied to 4 connected factors:

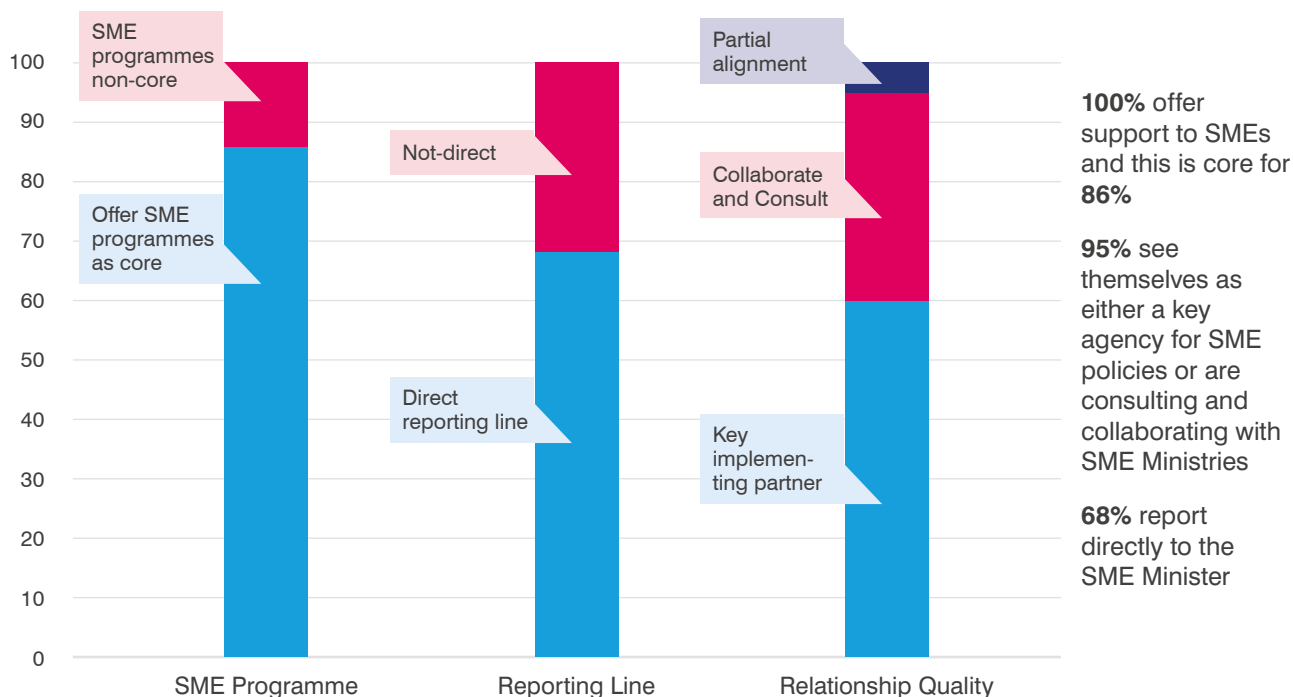
- Technology and design-led goods and services are less reliant on large capital investments to achieve scale economies and a competitive position. This means that SMEs in these growing sectors can go global sooner.
- E-commerce has opened the world of trade for small shipments from small companies
- The rapid pace of change means that TPOs must actively nurture the high potential SMEs and accompany their growth into future champions fast
- Strategic need for market diversification and value addition may depend on the innovation and niche products developed by SMEs.

This means that from several perspectives, SME support and trade promotion activities are linked:

- For SME leaders and those delivering SME and entrepreneurship support must keep in mind the opportunity for a rapid growth path that includes early internationalization via trade or investment.
- For TPOs to create a pipeline of future champions, they must be able to rely on other government agencies to foster the business conditions, access to finance and the regulatory environment that will enable these champions to emerge.
- For SME leaders, SME Ministers and SME development agencies to meet their objectives for improved SME competitiveness, they need to understand global opportunities, threats and competitors for both domestic and international opportunities for sales or investment. The knowledge and networks of TPOs are invaluable.
- For governments to reduce risk and harness growth opportunities with economic diversification and value addition, SME support and trade and investment promotion activities need to be aligned for a rapid and seamless growth path for innovative and diversified SMEs.

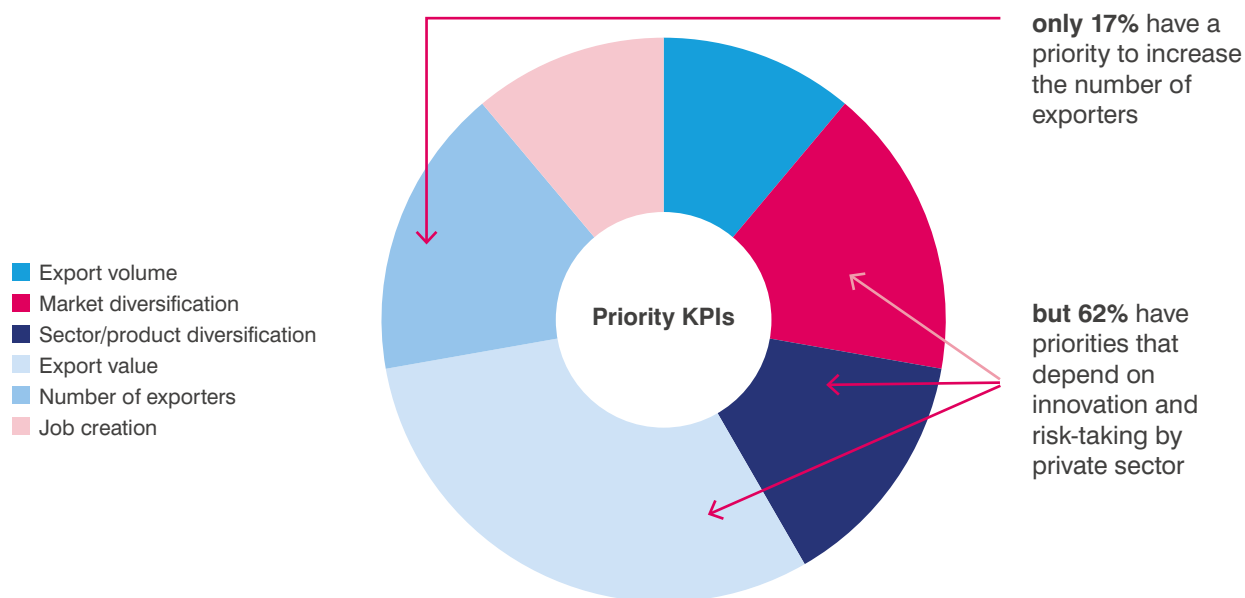
A recent short survey with the global TPO network explored the formal and informal links between trade promotion and SME support. For all TPO respondents, offering programmes for SMEs is important, and for a large majority it is core to their work. For two thirds of respondents, the Minister responsible for SMEs is in the direct reporting line of the TPO, and 60% are positioned as a key implementing agency for SME related initiatives by government. The willingness to consult and collaborate with departments and agencies that support SMEs is therefore very high.





ITC pre-conference survey of invited TPOs, 2025

Notwithstanding this alignment in principle, there are some drivers that may undermine the collaboration in practice. It is noteworthy that only 17% of TPO respondents have a priority indicator to increase the number of exporters, which would act as an incentive to work more directly with emerging exporters (likely to be SMEs), and therefore to collaborate with SME agencies.



Top 2 KPIs. ITC pre-conference survey of invited TPOs, 2025

Also noteworthy is that most respondents have indicators that refer to diversification and value addition. These are important risk mitigating tactics in a climate of trade uncertainty. But to deliver on these objectives requires innovation and risk taking by the private sector, and in particular by SMEs. This takes a supporting ecosystem and strong connections between SME support and trade promotion activities to accompany an SME from start up to export success.

About this roadmap

This roadmap proposes a set of simple opportunities for TPOs and SME Ministers to collaborate on actions that will serve their combined interest for SME growth and internationalisation. Two sources of information are combined: the panels and roundtables held during the TPO Leadership Dialogue, and the 3 White Papers prepared for consultation of SME Ministers and technical officials prior to the Global SME Ministerial Roundtable.

Firstly, during the technical sessions of the TPO Leadership Dialogue, participants also reflected on the ways in which TPOs could engage more effectively with SME Ministers. For each of the discussions key findings are set out below.

Session 1: Championing Change

Championing change with SME Ministers

1. Capture and share SME data to better predict risk and measure results
2. Support measures for SMEs that will build resilience to trade related shocks or allow them to benefit from emerging trends.
3. Collaborate on outreach and awareness raising for emerging exporters to support market diversification
4. Create a unified entry point for SME support

This section explores the critical need to strengthen coordination between TPOs and SME Ministers to ensure that trade support efforts are aligned with broader national policy objectives. As one participant observed, “there must be a strong link between TPO and Ministers as political power is a wheel for confidence with international trade.”

1. Capture and share SME data to better predict risk and measure results

TPOs and SME Ministries should collaborate in gathering and analyzing firm-level data, such as export readiness, risk exposure, and growth potential. Shared intelligence will support better-targeted interventions, help to understand and mitigate the likelihood and impact of risk, and strengthen accountability through measurable results.

2. Support initiatives for SMEs that will build resilience to trade related shocks or allow them to benefit from emerging trends.

Ministers and TPOs should co-create programs that help SMEs withstand trade-related shocks and leverage emerging opportunities like green growth and digitalization. This includes providing access to tailored finance, skills development, and localized tools that translate global trends into actionable opportunities for small businesses.

3. Collaborate on outreach and awareness raising for emerging exporters to support market diversification

Coordinated outreach, through joint campaigns, events, and service delivery, can help emerging exporters better understand and access available trade opportunities. By delivering coherent, localized information, TPOs and Ministries can encourage formalization, product diversification, and smoother entry into new markets. With more exporters, in more markets, and with more diverse and value-added products and services, countries can hedge against future trade related shocks.

4. Create a unified entry point for SMEs

TPOs and SME Ministries should develop integrated platforms or “one-stop shops” that streamline SME access to support services. These shared digital spaces would simplify navigation through regulatory requirements, compliance assistance, export readiness tools, and financial support, removing complexity from the export process. TPOs and SME support agencies should commit to “no wrong door”, ensuring that SMEs get the right help at the right time through rapid and coherent referrals.

Session 2: Delivering a Just and Inclusive Green Transition

Working with SME Ministers for a just and inclusive green transition

1. Align mandates and support joint actions for climate-related support.
2. Help to convene opportunities for equipping entrepreneurs and BSOs with new competencies
3. Collaborate in dialogues, including cross-border partnerships
4. Help to translate relevant climate-related policies from Ministries into SME action

To effectively drive the green transition for SMEs, TPOs and SME Ministers must work together to create enabling policy and institutional environments. The following are key proposals for strengthening the alignment between TPO climate responses and broader government support for SMEs:

1. Align mandates and support joint actions for climate related support

TPOs need to collaborate more with SME ministries to develop coordinated strategies that address climate risks, promote evidence-based policymaking, and integrate climate adaptation into SME policy agendas

They should coordinate efforts to deliver cohesive climate-related support, particularly around access to green finance. This includes partnering on SME-focused financial schemes, subsidies, and incentive programs that enable the adoption of sustainable practices.

Additionally, participants emphasized that climate responsibilities are often scattered across multiple ministries, leading to inefficiencies and confusion for SMEs. As one participant noted: “There’s a different ministry handling green policies, this creates gaps and confusion. We need a whole-of-government approach to tackle climate and digital transformation.” Effective coordination across ministries (i.e. SMEs, trade, finance, energy, environment) is essential for delivering clear, accessible, and well-funded support to SMEs.

2. Help to convene opportunities for equipping entrepreneurs and BSOs with new competencies

TPOs and SME Ministries should co-invest in building the sustainability and inclusion related technical capabilities of entrepreneurs. By convening training opportunities and sharing resources, they can equip key actors with the tools to navigate green standards, build ESG credentials, manage risks, and seize climate-related opportunities.

3. Collaborate in dialogues, including cross-border partnerships

Joint regional approaches are needed to strengthen green infrastructure and reduce policy fragmentation across borders. Harmonizing trade and environmental policies can ease compliance burdens for exporters and encourage investment in climate-resilient value chains.

TPOs can act as policy advocates and ecosystem conveners, helping shape and align national strategies with regional and global standards. As one participant stressed: “Regional collaboration and harmonized policy are key to driving reforestation, energy transition, and climate-smart trade.”

Discussions also called for stronger partnerships with more advanced economies to learn best practices and develop institutional capacity within ministries to embed climate considerations across entire value chains.

4. Help to translate relevant environment-related policies from Ministries into SME action

TPOs play a critical role in bridging the gap between high-level policies and on-the-ground implementation. By delivering targeted communication, training, and practical tools, TPOs can help SMEs understand and comply with new environmental regulations.

While SME Ministers act as green ambassadors—mobilizing political will and resources—TPOs should amplify that leadership by turning policy into action, ensuring that small businesses are not only informed, but equipped to adapt and thrive in a changing climate landscape.

Session 3: Animating the ecosystem

Working with SME Ministers for a more connected ecosystem of business support

1. Engage with new ecosystem actors in response to SME policies and regulations
2. Design new multi-actor service offerings to implement new SME policies and regulations, and overcome barriers
3. Broaden the ecosystem to ensure even the smallest businesses have a pathway to internationalisation

1. Engage with new ecosystem actors in response to SME policies and regulations

If an SME Minister is introducing new policies, support programmes or regulations, a TPO should immediately consider what new partners should be incorporated into its ecosystem. These new connections should support advocacy on behalf of exporters.

2. Design new multi-actor service offerings to implement new SME policies and regulations, and overcome barriers

For any change planned by SME Ministers, the successful implementation will require knowledge and new connections by TPOs and other business support actors. TPOs can lead the development of new service lines that incorporate solutions from other agencies for the benefit of current and further exporters.

3. Broaden the ecosystem to ensure even the smallest businesses have a pathway to internationalisation

Rapid changes in customer demand and the application of digital technology can create opportunities for small businesses to internationalise, even when they are quite small. Furthermore, for TPOs to deliver on their mandate to diversify markets and sectors, they may find it necessary to invest more time in building the export readiness of small but innovative firms. This means that TPOs can become an effective bridge between the trade support ecosystem and the entrepreneurship support ecosystem, thus strengthening the connections between Trade and SME portfolios.



Session 4: Engaging Anew

This final session served as a bridge between the TPO Leadership Dialogue and the Ministerial Roundtable, offering a space for open and candid exchange between TPO leaders and SME Ministers on transforming trade and changing lives.

In a closing roundtable discussion, the moderator and TPO representatives shared key reflections from the day's conversations, highlighting opportunities for greater alignment, coordination, and synergy between policy and practice.

As preparation for the Global SME Ministerial Roundtable, ITC shared three White Papers on the conference themes of Access to Finance, Digital Transformation and the Green Transition². Alongside the insights of the final session, these papers constituted the second source of inspiration for Roadmap 2.

In each of these papers specific recommendations for SME Ministers are grouped into three overarching categories that reflect the major hurdles for the internationalisation and growth of small businesses. For each of these categories – affordability, skills, and the regulatory environment – the TPO Leadership Dialogue identified ways in which TPOs can usefully engage with SME Ministers and agencies to contribute to addressing these barriers. When objectives, indicators and behaviours are aligned, the combined efforts of both trade and SME agencies and ministries through information, communication, advocacy, new solutions, skills development and policy implementation, can have a powerful effect on improving access by SMEs to global trade and investment opportunities.

1. Improve general affordability and access to finance

For export led growth by diversified SMEs, a seamless pathway of support from start-up to internationalisation must be built and sustained by ecosystem actors working together. The TPO and the SME Ministry should be positioned as highly connected nodes. In the context of these roadmaps, the goal of this ecosystem should be to:

- Reduce general costs and risks of doing business with data, knowledge, shared costs
- Improve access to finance through improved bankability and financial management skills of SMEs, referrals to financial service providers, investment facilitation.
- Nurture business models that translate green transition costs into business advantage (waste and energy reduction, premium positioning, regulatory and reputational risk reduction)

2. Close the skills gap

TPOs and the businesses they serve need access to new skills sets, in particular related to new technologies and digitalisation. By working alongside SME Ministers and agencies, TPOs can:

- Advocate for access to new skills as a key competitive advantage for businesses
- Influence educational curricula to build the skills for the future
- Help build linkages between the education sector and the private sector for training and effective career pathways
- Share knowledge, expertise and training opportunities across government agencies for government personnel
- Co-host specialised training opportunities for SMEs, with double the convening power and with complementary expertise.

3. Build a supportive regulatory environment

For SMEs to thrive at home and abroad they require a business and regulatory environment that provides competitive advantage. In particular a regulatory framework that fosters value addition and innovation will reduce trade-related risks by enabling greater economic and market diversification. Collaboration between TPOs and SME Ministers and agencies could help to:

- Gather data and feedback from SMEs on the current regulatory barriers
- Contribute market intelligence from networks abroad to improve assessments of competitive positioning

² [Download the White Papers for the 2025 Global SME Ministerial Roundtable](#)

- Combine forces to advocate for change
- Combine forces to educate SMEs on new policies, trade agreements and support programmes
- Ensure implementation of new policies contributes to a seamless experience for SMEs

4. Enhance strategic alignment across agencies

Effective collaboration between SME development and trade promotion activities may require a review of agency and ministry mandates, high level objectives, success indicators and budget allocation processes. Even with the best intentions, these structural elements can impede successful collaboration because of conflicting objectives and indicators, lack of role clarity, scope creep, unwillingness to share information, and reporting processes that do not allow for co-owned results. To enable a culture of collaboration SME Ministers and TPOs could:

- Create identical indicators for firm-level results reporting – eg firm level growth and internationalisation indicators
- Capture sufficient information on beneficiaries to allow for de-duplication of results – eg firm name or unique identifier
- Introduce new success indicators for both the TPO and the relevant SME counterpart recognising value created through collaboration eg growth/internationalisation results for SMEs benefiting from both SME development and trade promotion support

Tracking progress

TPOs will know if they are on track by measuring:

- Increase in number of SMEs benefiting from both SME development and trade promotion support
- Increase in overall net promotor or client satisfaction scores
- Evidence of successful advocacy for improvements to regulatory frameworks and business environment
- Evidence of actions to improve skills of current and future trade experts, policy makers and exporters.



Summary: ROADMAP 2 for greater alignment and collaboration between SME Ministers and TPOs

The combination of these two sources of insights and data -- the TPO Leadership Dialogue and the SME Ministerial White Papers -- results in a high-level roadmap set out below.



Future perspectives

The consultations and discussions before and during the TPO Leadership Dialogue highlighted the need for TPOs to future-proof their organisations and to create effective pathways to internationalisation for SMEs. In doing so, they will deliver on their mandate for export-led economic growth while complementing a broader imperative to foster innovation, job creation, sustainable and inclusive development and economic diversification. When strategic alignment, mandate clarity and effective incentives are in place, Trade Promotion Organizations and SME Ministers can be powerful partners for private sector resilience and inclusive growth. These two Roadmaps are designed to help shape and navigate this partnership.



