

**Global SME Ministerial Opening Remarks—ITC Executive Director
Pamela Coke-Hamilton**

[1976 words/13.5 minutes]

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and a very warm welcome to the first-ever Global SME Ministerial!

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed for her inspiring video message to us just now, and for driving home exactly what's at stake.

Not just the fate of SMEs around the world, but the health of our multilateral system and the relationships of trust that this system relies on.

And I want to thank Hon. Stella Tembisa Ndabeni, Minister, Ministry of Small Business Development, Republic of South Africa, and the impressive team at the Department for Small Business Development, for being such wonderful partners every step of the way.

It's rare to see history being made like this—and rarer still to find such like-minded partners who share the same values, passions, and hopes. And on that note, I also want to give special thanks to Ambassador Mzukisi

Qobo for his friendship, his support, and his guidance along this journey from the Geneva side.

And of course, this event would not have been possible without the support of our partners, including Absa Bank Kenya, the Afreximbank, the Africa Leadership and Dialogue Institute, the Mastercard Foundation, Alibaba, the South African presidency of the G20, the Gauteng Growth and Development Agency, the Industrial Development Corporation, OneValley, PVBLIC Foundation, South Africa's Small Enterprise Development and Finance Agency, Startup20 South Africa, Visa, and the World Intellectual Property Organization.

We thank you for your commitment, and we thank you for your trust.

When we announced at the ITC 60th anniversary celebrations a year ago our intention to host this ministerial, it was after we had done some pretty extensive reflections on what we had learned from six decades of helping SMEs grow, compete, and trade.

And what we saw was this: that whether we were at events devoted to the climate crisis, or conferences devoted to peacebuilding and conflict resolution, or decision-making forums on trade, the role of SMEs was, finally, part of the conversation.

Now that was a big feat in its own right, and we and so many partners had fought round-the-clock to make that possible.

But there was still something missing. Something vital.

Because no one was talking yet to SME ministers at a global scale and that was creating very real challenges on the ground.

From that realization, this platform was born.

An arena where SMEs and the issues that are shaping their lives are addressed at high political levels, from both the Global North and the Global South, for the first time.

From this platform, and this arena, we hope that a political voice emerges that will advocate, in every forum where SME issues are at stake, on behalf of their needs and their hopes.

Because too often, SMEs are having to bear the brunt of the world's disorder and chaos, whether from the ravages of climate change, the horrors of conflict, or the growing precarity of global supply chains.

And just when it looked like it couldn't get any harder, new roadblocks keep being put up in front of them.

Just this month, Lesotho declared a national "state of disaster" in the face of potential tariffs that could annihilate its textiles sector, and wreak havoc on the lives and livelihoods of the people behind it.

And too many SMEs, in too many countries, are finding that the relatively predictable trading system that they had relied on is being pushed to a near breaking point.

We can't let this keep happening. And we don't have to. That's why we're here.

I know that many of your ministries are recently established, and how it's often an outright battle to get the resources you need to deliver on your mandates, and to make sure your perspectives are heard and your requests answered when meeting with your country's cabinets or with parliaments.

Yet even in the face of that, you are still expected to make the impossible possible, and to make miracles happen when too often, miracles seem to be in short supply.

And yet you deliver anyway. Because that's what it means to serve.

It's a reality we know all too well ourselves at ITC, and across the UN system.

You'll have seen the headlines, I'm sure, of the crises that have beset our international community, and the tough conversations and decisions underway on how to move forward.

But I want to tell you this: these crises have only served to strengthen our resolve to continue standing up for the small and the vulnerable, advocating on behalf of SMEs who have no choice but to keep going.

We will never back down from that. No matter how hard it gets.

At ITC, we have over 60 years of experience and expertise in supporting trade-led development. We have tools and approaches that work, and a strong track record in enabling connected, sustainable, and inclusive trade that lifts everybody up.

And from that experience and expertise also comes some valuable perspective.

These aren't the first crises we've seen. These aren't the only inflection points we've experienced.

And it's why we believe firmly in playing the long game.

Over the next two days, we have asked you all to focus your attention around three topics: fostering green competitiveness in SMEs, spurring forward their digital transformation, and improving their access to finance.

We chose these themes because they reflect issues that will define the fates of SMEs around the world, regardless of whether you're an entrepreneur in West Africa, a women-led business in Latin America, or a digital freelancer in Central Asia.

They represent opportunities for innovation and prosperity, but also risks to SMEs' very survival if not managed well.

They require long-term planning, not "quick fixes."

And they reflect what we've heard from you over the years, as you work to find ways to support firms in your countries and regions.

Now, this ministerial is no talk shop, where the ideas raised here ultimately stay here.

This is no place for posturing or politics.

This is not just one more event to mark time until calmer days arrive.

This is a space for us to all get down to business.

To roll up our sleeves, marshal our collective knowledge and our energy, and find solutions across these three areas that will bring the benefits of trade within reach of more SMEs.

Which is exactly what you've all been asking for.

When you go back to your capitals, your ministries, your cabinet meetings and your meetings with heads of state and government, you'll be taking back with you concrete solutions, with the evidence to back them up.

Solutions that have already been tried and tested in many other countries, both similar to and different from your own.

And you'll also have learned about what doesn't work, and what pitfalls to be wary of and why.

As you look to put these solutions into practice, I hope that you will see ITC as a partner of choice in helping more of your SMEs go global through trade.

Finally, I hope that you will go home reinvigorated, knowing that even on those days where you may feel like you are the only one fighting SMEs' corner at your cabinet or in your government, you are actually part of a dedicated global community working to ensure SMEs can thrive and that no one is left behind.

And that community will set an example that we hope other decision-makers throughout our world will follow.

We are living at a time where disasters are legion.

Where international cooperation is being treated a "nice to have" rather than a necessity.

Where pessimism risks winning the fight over hope, and where idealism risks being dismissed as folly.

We are seeing too many people throwing in the towel, ready to walk away from decades of work to shore up our multilateral system, and the values that underpin it.

It's a situation that makes it far too easy for us to waste our precious energy putting out fires, papering over the cracks in our systems, just to get from one day to the next.

And all while hoping that cooler heads will someday prevail, thereby denying our own agency in making a different future possible.

If that doesn't change right now, the results would spell disaster not just for the SMEs we all champion, but for the entire world, including the smallest and more vulnerable among us.

Yesterday, as you will know, we held a TPO Leadership Dialogue bringing together representatives from trade promotion organizations around the world.

They told us about their experiences helping SMEs export, the innovations they've developed to meet an ever-evolving array of needs, the strains they are under in this chaotic world in which we live.

And what I heard, over and over again, is the same refrain: that they are excited to work more closely with you, both on the main tracks of this ministerial and in the other areas that matter most for SMEs.

They won't give up. And neither will we.

These TPO representatives are here with us for the duration of the ministerial, as are entrepreneurs and small business leaders, development institution officials, and so many others who together make up the fabric of the SME ecosystem.

I encourage you all to meet with them over the coming days and find opportunities for engagement and alignment, which together you can put into practice upon your return home.

As I said before, this is the first time that ITC has convened a global meeting at this political level.

And it won't be the last.

But making this ministerial meeting possible didn't happen overnight.

It's thanks to the tireless efforts of several extraordinary people, including both my own ITC team and our partners at the South African Department of Small Business Development.

They have pulled out all the stops to make this event possible, because they believe in its potential.

And they have delivered what will become a legacy project from South Africa's historic G20 presidency, showing why trade and SME development must be put squarely at the heart of the global economic agenda.

Finally, I want to close with both a promise and an appeal.

First, our promise.

That we at ITC will take the ideas and energy and optimism of this week and run with it. You can count on that.

And now, our appeal.

That you make full use of this political voice that has emerged from this Global SME Ministerial, whether in your home countries, or when you engage with your peers on the international stage.

If we can each do that, then in two years' time when we reconvene in this format, I know we will have some impressive results to show from our labours.

But of course, I can't predict exactly what the future holds.

So I ask you to keep this in mind, not just over the coming days, but over the coming years, given the near-certainty of more crises showing up on our doorsteps.

And I hope that this reminder will serve us all well, at moments when we might otherwise risk losing our nerve.

It was just over 30 years ago that South African President Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, told the world that despite the horrors he had witnessed and the trials he had experienced, optimism is what he still carried in his heart.

He reminded us that we must always keep our "head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward."

Because, as he said, while "there were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair"—as defeat was then sure to follow. It's a truth that we would all do well to heed. Thank you all.