

Sustainable, competitive and resilient value chains: the One UN response

Operational note

June 2026

Background

Global value chains are under growing pressure. Heightened regulatory requirements on due diligence, rising expectations on environmental and social performance, and increasing geopolitical tensions and market fragmentation are reshaping how trade and production systems operate. At the same time, persistent risks—ranging from environmental degradation to human rights abuses and unequal distribution of value—continue to undermine both development outcomes and long-term business competitiveness.

These challenges are systemic. They do not originate in a single country, sector or stage of production, and cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. Fragmented approaches—whether policy-driven, market-based or project-specific—often fail to align incentives across actors, resulting in higher compliance costs, limited scalability, and uneven impact. As a result, opportunities to leverage value chains as engines of sustainable growth, decent work and resilience remain underexploited.

A more integrated response is needed—one that connects policy frameworks, market systems and enterprise-level practices and consumer demands across the full lifecycle of value chains.

Sustainable, competitive and resilient value chains have strong catalytic potential to accelerate progress across multiple Sustainable Development Goals, including decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), gender equality (SDG 5), climate action (SDG 13), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10), by aligning economic performance with social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

Sound policies and effective interventions therefore depend on consultation with workers, producers, SMEs, rights holders, consumer associations and affected communities. Such engagement is essential for identifying salient human rights and environmental risks, supporting the transition to circularity, and advancing gender-responsive due diligence and responsible business conduct, alongside targeted interventions such as business development services, skills development and technology transfer. Digitalization and data systems (traceability tools, digital platforms, supply chain analytics) play a critical enabling role by improving transparency and strengthening monitoring and compliance across value chains.

The One UN Response

The One UN response brings together nine UN entities (ILO, OHCHR, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNECE, UNEP, UNIDO, UNODC and UN Women) to deliver a coordinated, system-level approach to realize sustainable, competitive and resilient value chains.

Building on each entity's distinct mandate, the One UN response combines normative expertise, policy support, technical assistance and field presence, offering countries and partners a coherent and package of support that can be adapted to different contexts, sectors, and priorities.

This joint approach enables the UN system to address the interconnected economic, social and environmental dimensions of value chains in a consistent manner. It strengthens policy coherence, reduces duplication, and aligns interventions across institutions and actors—helping governments and businesses navigate increasingly complex regulatory and market environments. Crucially, it also bridges the gap between standards and implementation, by linking global frameworks on human rights, labour standards, trade, environmental sustainability and gender equality with practical tools, market systems and enterprise support.

At the country level, the One UN response will harness the leadership and convening power of the UN Resident Coordinator system to bring together relevant expertise from across the UN system, delivering integrated policy support aligned with national development priorities.

Why this matters for partners

For funding partners, this approach offers a unique opportunity to support systemic change at scale. Coordinated UN action reduces fragmentation, leverages complementary mandates, and enables interventions that operate simultaneously at policy, market and enterprise levels. This increases efficiency, enhances impact, and creates the conditions for sustainable outcomes that can be replicated and scaled across countries, sectors and trade corridors.

What is new about the One UN response

The One UN response is innovative in its shift toward a system-level, integrated approach to value chains, linking trade policy, sustainability, consumer protection guidelines, and human rights norms and standards, logistics, digitalization, and enterprise development into one coherent framework. It moves from fragmented interventions to end-to-end solutions that connect policy, infrastructure, and market actors.



Our approach

The implementation approach targets the systems that underpin value chains, ensuring that policies, institutions, market incentives and business practices are considered as interconnected enablers to drive systemic change towards inclusive and sustainable behavior, and that institutions reinforce respect for people and planet. Interventions focus on three interconnected levels.

1. Rules of the game: Strengthened governance and policy environment

The community's work in this level focus on aligning national frameworks with international norms and standards, strengthening transparency and traceability systems, and creating accountability mechanisms and incentives that encourage responsible business conduct, investment, and compliance across value chains.

Strengthening regulatory and policy frameworks for responsible business conduct

The ILO, OHCHR and OECD have jointly implemented the Responsible Business Conduct in Latin America and the Caribbean (CERALC) project, supporting countries in advancing responsible business conduct (RBC) through stronger policy and regulatory frameworks aligned with international standards. The project engages governments, employers' and workers' organizations, civil society and communities, and other stakeholders to enhance coherence across laws, policies and institutions, while promoting due diligence. The main sectors of focus are the extractive and agri-business sectors. By reinforcing governance systems and integrating RBC principles into national development, trade and investment strategies, it contributes to more sustainable, resilient and equitable economic outcomes. A sister project focusing on sub-Saharan Africa involving also UNDP and other multilateral actors will be implemented from 2026. Combining ILO's labour standards expertise with OHCHR's human rights frameworks, the initiative ensures regulatory coherence across both domains—reducing fragmentation that typically increases compliance costs for governments and businesses.

UN Women and the UN Sustainable Stock

Exchanges initiative a joint programme of UNCTAD, UNGC, UNEP-FI and the PRI) are working jointly to support over 130 stock exchanges and their regulators to strengthen the capacity of market participants to implement gender-responsive business practices. As key market

influencers, exchanges and their regulators are increasingly adopting gender-related listing

rules and disclosure guidance. This is helping to shift market expectations, strengthen corporate accountability, and drive more inclusive and sustainable investment outcomes at scale.

Closing knowledge gaps for evidence-based policy making

Through joint and collaborative efforts between UNODC and ILO, studies on human trafficking prevention through the regulation of labour recruitment, and fees and abusive recruitment practices, were conducted, including recommendations to inform evidence-based policy development in these areas. These resources, supported not only by Governments, but also by representatives from employer and labour organizations worldwide, continue to be used and referenced by companies in developing corporate human rights due diligence (HRDD) strategies and governments in development of relevant regulatory frameworks.

2. Market enablers: Dynamic and norm-compliant private sector ecosystem

The market-supporting systems comprise the services, infrastructure and institutional arrangements that enable value chains to function competitively and sustainably. This includes access to finance, specialized training, risk assessment and due diligence frameworks, social audit and verification tools, quality infrastructure, certification and standards bodies, data and traceability systems, and business development services. Strengthening these systems means enhancing their availability, accessibility, quality, and impact, and promoting market-based and norm-compliant provision. This enables enterprises to improve productivity, meet sustainability, consumers rights and due diligence requirements, and compete in international markets.

The UN transparency protocol: An open and collaborative UN approach to supply chain transparency

Developed under the UN/CEFACT open development process, the UNECE - United Nations Transparency Protocol (UNTP) provides an open-source, interoperable framework that enables companies, governments and other stakeholders to exchange verifiable sustainability and traceability information across supply chains without reliance on proprietary platforms or vendor lock-in. The protocol supports transparency, due diligence, digital product passports and trusted sustainability claims while remaining compatible with existing industry and national systems.

The UNTP is designed as a global public good: its intellectual property is owned by the United Nations, freely available to all users, and supported by open-source reference tools and implementation guidance. Its consensus-based, inclusive development process engages governments, industry, software providers, researchers and civil society, with UNCTAD, UNEP and UNIDO among the UN agencies actively participating. Real-world pilots in textiles, agriculture and critical minerals demonstrate how multilateral cooperation and open standards can lower compliance costs, improve interoperability, strengthen trust in sustainability data, and help enterprises — including SMEs — participate more effectively and sustainably in global value chains.

Preventing human trafficking and forced labour in UN supply chains

UNODC and ILO co-chair the 16-member UN Taskforce for Combating Human Trafficking and Forced Labour in UN Supply Chains, established to address growing concerns about these risks within UN procurement. Under its Supplier Sensitization Initiative, the Taskforce has developed a suite of practical resources for vendors and companies, including self-assessment tools, a social audit template and verification guide, a supply chain mapping guide, sample contract clauses, supplier statements of commitment, advocacy messages and a senior-management briefing. This initiative has helped to align expectations and provide joint support for UN suppliers, thereby reducing duplication of efforts.

United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS)

The United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards is a joint initiative of UNIDO, UNEP, ILO, UNCTAD, FAO and ITC that supports developing countries in leveraging voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) for sustainable development. Through policy dialogue, research and capacity-building, it helps governments and stakeholders understand, adopt and benefit from VSS — strengthening national capacities and ensuring that standards contribute to inclusive trade, environmental protection and improved livelihoods, particularly for small producers and SMEs. A core pillar of its work is support to 15+ national and regional multi-stakeholder platforms, which bring together governments, private sector, producers, civil society and standard-setting bodies to coordinate national approaches to VSS and integrate them into development, trade and export strategies.

3. Market actors: Enterprises and workers

This level focuses on the businesses and people who create value in chains (lead companies, SMEs, producers and workers) whose practices shape competitiveness, compliance and sustainability outcomes.

Multinational and large corporations have a long way to go to establish inclusive and sustainable purchasing practices that go beyond tier one suppliers. Yet, they spend trillions of dollars in their supply chains. That purchasing power shapes markets, influences supplier behavior and determines working conditions far beyond their direct control. Traceability and transparency tools, and supplier and consumers engagement strategies, can support them in addressing consumer protection, human rights-based abuses, including violence and harassment against women and other systemic inequalities, in global supply chains.

SMEs, like companies of all sizes, are expected to respect human rights. Sustainability and due diligence requirements, as well as compliance pressures from other companies and buyers also create opportunities for upgrading, integration, and improved market access. Interventions support these actors in improving productivity, adopting sustainable and circular approaches, and meeting evolving standards and due diligence requirements. Emphasis is placed on resource efficiency and circular economy, respecting human rights, promoting decent work, gender equality and inclusive participation, so that the benefits of value chain integration are widely shared and contribute to resilient livelihoods.

SwitchMed

SwitchMed was launched in 2013 by UNEP's Economy Division, the UNEP/MAP regional activity centre for Sustainable Consumption and Production (MedWaves), and UNIDO. Funded by the European Union and coordinated with DG NEAR, the initiative helps eight Southern Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia) shift toward sustainable consumption and production and advance circular economy approaches that decouple human development from environmental degradation. Through policy development, demonstration activities, and networking, the partnership scales up eco- and social innovations, equipping policy makers, eco-innovative SMEs, industries, start-ups, and entrepreneurs to create jobs and protect natural resources.

Building on a decade of results, the EU has launched the Green Forward Initiative for the Mediterranean as SwitchMed's successor — a multi-partner programme implemented by UNIDO, Expertise France, and SPARK to scale circular and resource-efficient business models across the region's SMEs.



A tailored, responsive and context-specific approach

This system-level, integrated approach to value chains combines interventions to strengthen governance and policy environment, promotes dynamic and norm-compliant private sector ecosystem, and supports the businesses and people who create value in chains. It can be deployed with national, regional or global interventions in each of the three levels, or be deployed as a sectoral, comprehensive approach.

Critical energy transition minerals

In the minerals and mining sector, the UN is already coordinating its approaches through the Secretary General's initiative on Critical Energy Transition Minerals (CETMs). The initiative established a UN Task Force, co-chaired by UNCTAD, UNEP, UNDP and UN Regional Economic Commissions, in which more than 20 UN agencies participate, and which provides global policy recommendations, implementation frameworks and technical support to producer countries to foster sustainable economic development rather than just raw extraction. It is guided under seven voluntary principles, including placing human rights at the core of critical mineral value chains, protecting biodiversity, promoting economic benefits for local communities, and fostering transparent, fair trade. In 2023, UNODC, in consultation with several entities, including UNIDO, developed Legislative Guidance on Illegal Mining and Trafficking of Metals.

Agricultural commodities

UN agencies active in agricultural commodities—FAO, IFAD, ITC, UNEP, UNIDO, UNDP—have been coming together in 2026 to discuss their complementary mandates spanning policy support, value chain development, sustainable trade, environmental sustainability, and investment mobilization. This shows the added value of the UN system as a coordinated platform to deliver integrated, country-level support that links smallholders to sustainable and inclusive markets. The ambition includes working jointly to mobilize public and private finance, scale up investment-ready programmes, and engage governments and the private sector in delivering replicable, large-scale impact. The work of the UN in this area presents strong synergies with priorities from key donors and partners, including the European Union and its Global Gateway strategy.



How partners can get involved

Partners can support a range of complementary interventions that translate the One UN approach into scalable results, including policy and regulatory support, the expansion of existing initiatives, the development of joint pilot initiatives in priority sectors, and the roll out of shared platforms and digital public goods such as traceability and transparency systems. These can be financed through flexible modalities—such as multi-agency programmes, pooled funding mechanisms, or targeted country-level pilots—allowing partners to align resources with specific thematic, geographic or sectoral priorities while benefiting from coordinated UN delivery.

The initiative can leverage the UN Joint SDG Fund, which offers a strategic derisking platform to finance and scale this integrated approach, catalyzing coordinated UN action and unlocking transformative investments in sustainable value chains to accelerate SDG achievement.

Such investments are expected to generate measurable outcomes, including reduced environmental and human rights risks in value chains, improved market access for enterprises (particularly SMEs), increased decent job creation, and strengthened compliance with evolving international due diligence and sustainability requirements.

The One UN initiative serves as an umbrella framework, opening the door to more sector-specific joint cooperation, for example in the field of agricultural commodities, textiles, and critical minerals.



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This Community is open to UN entities working on Sustainable Value Chains.

