Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and friends,

I would first like to offer my warmest thanks for this honour **to ICSB and its President, Dr Ayman El Tarabishy**.

I remember the pleasure and the considerable responsibility I had in representing the OECD Secretariat of the Working Party on SMEs and Entrepreneurship (WPSMEE), serving as keynote speaker at the ICSB World Conference, in Halifax, Canada, on 24 June 2008. My presentation was about *"Removing Barriers to Entrepreneurship and Fostering Innovative and Fast Growing SMEs"*. Eighteen years later, these issues remain as pressing as ever…

Before going any further, I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my colleagues at the OECD in particular, **Lucia Cusmano, Lamia Kamal-Chaoui, John Potter**, **Miriam Koreen and Mariarosa Lunati,** who continue to serve this prestigious institution.

I am deeply touched by this tribute and the kindness behind it, because it comes from people who shared this story, carried it forward and gave it a reach I had hoped for.

This honour is also a tribute to:

- everyone who believed that SMEs deserved a full place in economic debate and public policy;
- the colleagues who devoted their energy to this work; and
- the countries and individuals who supported us at different stages. I think in particular of:

  Pierre-André Julien, then Professor at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières in Canada, who first plunged me into the world of SMEs from 1988, and encouraged me to bring SME issues to the forefront of the OECD's policy agenda;

  Peter Fritz, in 1992, then Chairman of the Small Business Council of Australia, thanks to whom Australia became the driving force behind the creation of the **Working Party on SMEs;**

Chris Hall, then Professor at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), a pioneer in the international study of SMEs, with whom the OECD SME Unit conducted a number of studies in the 1990s.

Jean-Luc Vo Van Qui, of the French Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry, who served as an innovative and constructive Chair of the Working Party on SMEs and Entrepreneurship in the late 1990s;

Sergio Arzeni, former Director of the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs and Local Development (CFE). In the early 2000s, Sergio and I recognized that the OECD needed a dedicated body to address the issues and challenges facing SMEs. We built the case for its creation and championed the initiative with the senior officials who made it happen. In 2004, the OECD CFE was established.

And finally, Herwig Schlögl, former Deputy Secretary General of the OECD, for his invaluable support.

I am deeply grateful to them.

An idea never becomes an institution through one person alone. It takes allies, perseverance and determination to overcome the internal and external hurdles and obstacles along the way and sometimes a great deal of patience…

When I began working on SMEs at the OECD in 1988, their importance was far from being recognised as it is today. Attention focused mainly on macroeconomic issues and large firms. Small businesses, despite their numbers and their presence in everyday life, were largely invisible and overlooked, left at the margins of analysis and decision-making.

It was not until the end of the 1980s that governments in France, as in most OECD countries, began to take a closer interest in SMEs as an important source of jobs, innovation and growth. David Birch's famous 1981 study in the United States, **"Who Creates Jobs?",** marked a significant turning point, although researchers have continued to debate it.

France was the first country to ask the OECD, in 1988, to undertake an international comparative analysis of the programmes and policies its member countries had put in place for SMEs. I had the honour of preparing that first report, which was presented to the OECD Industry Committee in 1989.

Four years later, **in March 1993, the OECD Working Party on SMEs was formally established.** Its mandate was to examine the nature and scope of national and international SME issues and policies, including those relating to micro-enterprises, and to promote best practices based on policy evaluation.

This was a decisive step: the OECD was creating a body devoted to small businesses and their challenges.

But when an idea is new, it is not always immediately obvious to everyone.

At every stage, we had to explain why SMEs mattered, why they needed tailored policies and why they deserved a place in the Organisation's work. *"Small was not so beautiful"…*

There was internal resistance, competing priorities and, at times, *a sense that the issue was simply minor.* Outside the OECD, too, SMEs had few means of making their voices heard alongside large organisations and well-established interests.

Fortunately, we were not alone. Some countries recognised the importance of this work early on and gave us invaluable support. People inside and outside the OECD, as well as private-sector organisations **such as ICSB,** shared their expertise and helped open doors. Their confidence mattered. I want to express my gratitude to them today.

Women's entrepreneurship is one example that has stayed with me. Representatives of American women's entrepreneurs groups, led by **Virginia LittleJohn,** then President of the National Association of Women Business Owners, wanted the OECD to take up the issue and organise a first major international conference, funded by IBM. When I presented the proposal to my director at the time, he asked me: *"Is women's entrepreneurship really an issue?"*

That question captured the challenge. **We had to assemble evidence and make the case.**

The OECD's first international conference on Women's Entrepreneurship in 1997, followed by the second in 2000, helped bring recognition to the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs and the need for appropriate data and policies.

What had first been questioned became a subject of international debate. *That, too, is progress: gradually widening the circle of what we are willing to take seriously.*

It was also important to raise the profile of our work and enrich it through cooperation with other international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, and with non-member countries.

We therefore worked with the European Commission and Eurostat; the World Bank and the IMF; UN bodies and specialized agencies, including UNCTAD, the ILO, UNIDO and WIPO; intergovernmental regional forums and organizations, such as APEC and ASEAN; multilateral development banks, including the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the African Development Bank (AfDB); and non-governmental organizations supporting small businesses and SMEs, such as the International Council for Small Business (ICSB) and the World Association for Small and Medium Enterprises (WASME).

These partnerships allowed us to compare experience, better understand countries' realities and share ideas and good practice. We believe the benefits were mutual: each organisation brought its expertise, networks and perspectives.

I commend ICSB for the reach of its work and am pleased that this collaboration continues.

At the invitation of the Italian Government, the Working Party organized, in Bologna in June 2000, the OECD's first Ministerial Conference on SMEs.

49 countries took part, including 20 non-member countries.

At the invitation of the Turkish Government, the second Ministerial Conference was held in Istanbul in June 2004.

72 countries participated, including 42 non-members.

These meetings brought governments, businesses and international organisations together around enduring issues: *the place of SMEs in a globalised economy, access to finance and markets, innovation, skills, value chains, policy evaluation*.

They also reminded us just how essential hard facts are to sound policymaking. Without comparable statistics and high-quality data, SMEs risked remaining invisible in policy decisions. *This was a long struggle.*

I am glad that all this work continued after I left the OECD at the end of 2010, thanks to my colleagues and the teams who carried it forward and gave it remarkable reach.

The Working Party grew and the issue gained institutional recognition. Elevating the OECD Working Party on SMEs and Entrepreneurship to Committee status was a battle we had fought for years.

The team that succeeded us won it, and I warmly congratulate them, especially Lamia Kamal-Chaoui, Miriam Koreen and Lucia Cusmano.

This achievement reflects how far we have come and how much remains to be done.

I need hardly tell you that the fundamental challenges facing SMEs have not really changed. What has changed, and at a breathtaking pace, over the past 15 years is the world around them. *A truism, perhaps, but no less true for that.*

Uncertainty has become an all-pervasive and profoundly anxiety-inducing reality for populations throughout the world.

It is driven by:

- **an unstable, if not chaotic, geopolitical context,** fuelled by international tensions and "unavowed ambitions" (to borrow the title of Thomas Gomart's book[1]);
- **major disruptions to international trade**, including tariffs and various conflicts;
- **the imperative of adapting to climate change;**
- **the imperative to use artificial intelligence** *in a controlled, sustainable and responsible way;* and
- **the fading promise of a better future for younger generations…**

Adapting to climate change and using AI open up new fields for research and development and offer considerable opportunities. But they may also widen the gap

[1] Thomas Gomart, ''Les ambitions inavouées – Ce que préparent les grandes puissances'', Tallandier, 2023

between businesses able to master them and those without the resources and skills to do so.

We know that SMEs contribute to employment, innovation and growth. We also know that they contribute to **social cohesion, the vitality of cities, regions and territories**, and to the **fight against poverty.**

SMEs are not all destined to become large firms, nor do they need to. Their diversity is a strength. Yet SMEs still need a supportive environment, clear and reasonable rules that are limited in number, skills, finance and attentive public authorities.

The challenges have evolved; their importance has not.

Healthy SMEs, supported by effective and fair public policies, will not save the world on their own. **But they can help make it more resilient, inclusive and free.** In a time of global disorder, SMEs and entrepreneurship are an essential part of the answer.

I would like to conclude with this conviction: **equality, justice and inclusion are not only moral imperatives**; they help societies and economies make full use of their talent and help them progress.

I thank my OECD colleagues who carried the SME and Entrepreneurship work forward, the countries and individuals who supported it, and ICSB for its lasting commitment. *I am pleased to see these ties continue to grow.*

Thank you.