



Concept Note

UNDESA side-event at the 59th Session of the Commission for Social Development

Leveraging digital technologies for social inclusion

16 February 2021, 11.30 a.m.-12.45 p.m. Virtual meeting



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of digital transformation around the world. In the context of successive lockdowns and confinement measures put in place by governments to curb the spread of the virus, digital technologies have played a valuable role in sustaining daily life by providing remote access to education and health care, supporting business continuity through telework and e-commerce, and keeping people socially connected. Throughout 2020, governments used digital technologies to deliver measures to protect jobs and livelihoods and extend social protection coverage, introduced as part of major fiscal stimulus packages.

At the same time, this accelerated pace of digital transformation is also shining a light on the pervasiveness of the digital divide and its role in exacerbating pre-existing socio-economic inequalities. Currently half of the world's population (an estimated 3.7 billion people) does not use the Internet.¹ This offline population is mainly composed of already marginalized and disadvantaged groups and is disproportionately, female, rural, poor, elderly, and with limited education and low literacy. Their digital exclusion is not only caused by lack of access to the ICT infrastructure, but also the high cost of Internet connection and devices, a lack of digital and literacy skills, weak awareness of the benefits of being connected, and lack of relevant content in local languages.

The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has already pushed more than 100 million additional people into poverty and is widening inequalities, and, now risks further deepening the digital divide and pushing disadvantaged groups and those in vulnerable situations further behind. We need to identify effective strategies and policies to close the digital divide - between rural and urban areas, men and women, girls and boys, youth and older persons, the rich and the poor. As a part of COVID-19 recovery strategy, concrete policies and measures need to be developed in a collaborative manner, bringing diverse perspectives from multiple stakeholders, based on the principle of Internet as a public good. Such policy measure will leverage digital technologies to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda through eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities, promoting decent work for all, and fostering social inclusion.

¹ <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/2019-PR19.aspx>

Goals and Objectives

In conjunction with the release of the **UNDESA Policy Brief “Leveraging digital technologies for social inclusion**, this side event seeks to examine how digital technologies can be used as an effective tool to ‘build back better’ in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. More specifically, the event will identify how to promote digital inclusion and achieve universal connectivity, focusing on the following four dimensions: 1) access, 2) affordability, 3) digital skills and literacy, 4) awareness/relevance of content. This will include identifying common challenges and sharing good policies and practices, lessons learned, innovative approaches, and strategies to establish multi-stakeholder partnerships to close the digital divide (between national and local governments, the STI community, academia, the private sector, civil society organizations, disadvantaged social groups and communities, and local innovators).

Guiding questions

- How does the accelerated pace of digital transformation spurred by the COVID-19 crisis risk exacerbating inequalities and further excluding of those who are not digitally connected?
- What policies or measures can be put in place to address the four important factors behind the digital divide: access, affordability, digital skills, and relevance/awareness?
- How can broad partnerships help to devise inclusive policies to close the digital divide? What are the obstacles to establishing such multi-stakeholder partnerships?

Format

Each speaker will have 7 minutes for their presentation. Presentations will be followed by a Q&A session and an interactive dialogue with the audience.

Speakers

Opening remarks: Ms. Daniela Bas, Director, Division for Inclusive Social Development, UNDESA

Moderator: Ms. Wenyan Yang, Chief, Global Dialogue for Social Development Branch, Division for Inclusive Social Development, UNDESA

Panellists:

Ms. Carla Licciardello, Digital Inclusion Coordinator, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

Mr. Clovis Freire, Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Section, UNCTAD

Ms. Yu Ping Chan, Senior Programme Officer, Office of the Envoy on Technology

Dr. Ifeyinwa Ofong, Representative to the UN, WorldWIDE Network Nigeria: Women in Development and Environment

Ms. Tania Rosas, the SDG Young Leader on technology

Mr. Ranjitsinh Disale, teacher at the Zilla Parishad Primary School, India and the recipient of the Global Teacher Prize 2020