Fifty-ninth Session of the Commission for Social Development

Interactive dialogue with senior officials of the UN Systems on the priority theme

"Socially just transition towards sustainable development: The role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all"

Wednesday, 10 February 2021, 3:00 – 5:00pm
(Virtual meeting)

Chair's Summary

The Commission for Social Development held an interactive dialogue with senior officials of the UN system on the priority theme, "Socially just transition towards sustainable development: The role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all". The panelists included **Ms. Alicia Bárcena Ibarra**, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), **Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana**, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), **Mr. Houlin Zhao,** Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), **Ms. Anita Bhatia**, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and **Mr. Gerard Quinn**, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Panel was moderated by **Mr. Elliott Harris**, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and Chief Economist at the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

COVID-19 and the need for sustainable development

Despite the remarkable progress in socio-economic development in the past decades, inequality and social exclusion remain a significant concern. The COVID-19 pandemic is only the latest among several factors behind the uncertainty of the current systems and the unpredictability of the future. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, rapid technological change had been profoundly affecting people and society, while the adaptation and response capabilities of labour markets and governments lag behind, contributing to high and rising disparities in many countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed long-accumulated structural vulnerabilities, and worsened pre-existing inequalities. While the pandemic affected all people, its negative impacts hit

disadvantaged and marginalized groups and communities disproportionately. Without alternative income, savings, or social protection, millions of vulnerable workers and their families are being pushed deeper into hardship, reversing decades of gains in poverty reduction. For example, over 81 million jobs were lost in the Asia Pacific region alone, and large reductions in working hours pushed millions of people into working poverty.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has also triggered an unprecedented effort by policymakers to address the specific needs of the most vulnerable. Digital technologies also offered solutions through improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. For instance, digital platforms enable unified online databases to enhance the design and delivery of social protection schemes. In the public health sector, digitization supports the transition from a diagnostic to a preventive health system, facilitates a more people/patients-centred approach, and enables more efficient and safe service delivery. As we recover, there is an urgent need to address the underlying factors that led to high and widening inequality and promote a more people-centered approach to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The digital divide

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the benefits of new technologies are not equally shared, with many people remaining offline. In the Latin America and the Caribbean region, about two-thirds (about 67.5 per cent) of the population have access to the Internet, while one-thirds, or 40 million households, are still unconnected—the majority of which are in the lowest income quintiles, in rural areas, and overrepresented by women. Even when the Internet is available, low speed connection limits the full use of digital solutions, such as teleworking, digital medicine and online education. These pre-existing digital gaps have been further aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the offline population being pushed further behind and more likely to bear the long-term consequences of the pandemic. For example, 46 per cent of the children aged 5-12 years in the LAC region are not participating in distance learning due to poor access to the Internet and/or digital devices. This has exacerbated pre-existing educational gaps between the privileged and highly vulnerable students.

The benefits of technological and digital advances are shaped by what ECLAC called “the matrix of social inequality”, indicating that individuals face unequal chances to enjoy their rights and access to resources and opportunities, based on a number of structural axes, such as socio-economic status, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and location. While the digital revolution presents great opportunities to enhance economic empowerment and resilience for women and girls, significant gaps remain in their access and use of ICTs, with a gender gap reaching 31 per cent in the Least Developed Countries; barriers in terms of cost, digital skills, regulations, and social norms precludes them from fully benefit from the digitalization. Limited digital literacy makes women more vulnerable to challenges associated with privacy and safety and at higher risk of cyber violence.

Digital technologies for sustainable development

Digital transformation alone will not improve welfare for all. Specific policies aiming at closing current inclusion gaps and realizing an effective digital citizenship are required so that all people can actively participate in the new digital society. It is essential that digital devices and the Internet

become accessible and affordable to all. In addition, there is a need to address intersectional forms of discrimination faced by people in vulnerable situations, incorporate human rights and gender perspectives in policies and programmes, and ensure cultural relevance of the content to promote digital inclusion.

Universal connectivity should be promoted through what ITU defined as the four "I"s; Infrastructure (determine who is connected and who is not and update current applications); Investment (enhance public funding to extend coverage to poor communities and rural and remote areas); Innovation (implement innovative policies to create an enabling environment for business); and Inclusiveness (pursue more inclusive business models in collaboration with various stakeholders, including the private sector, to leave no one behind).

Beyond connectivity, digital skills and literacy are indispensable for more effective participation and inclusion in the digital era. This requires skills and training strategies throughout the life cycle. The use of digital technologies requires cognitive skills such as literacy and mathematics, operational skills, as well as critical thinking and information selection skills, self-care skills and ethical behavior in the digital world. There is a need to scale up investments in education to redesign education systems with a greater focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

To close gender gaps in the digitalized economy, labour regulations need to be reviewed to ensure that new digital work is decent and accessible to all, particularly for women and persons with disabilities. It is also important to provide targeted training in key skills and information, such as e-learning and e-commerce; facilitate access to digital and mobile tools; provide targeted trainings in science, technology and innovation (STI), and promote employment opportunities in the digital labour platforms. The panel shared an example of a multi-stakeholder partnership, the Generation Equality's Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality, that works to catalyze action, drive investment and deliver concrete results to close the digital gender divide.

Integrated national digital, economic and social development strategies need to be devised to simultaneously address existing barriers and gaps in all these areas. These systemic strategies are critical to improve standards and tools, mobilize resources to support data infrastructure and governance to gain efficiency in social delivery. LAC's Regional agenda for inclusive social development (RAISD) adopted in 2019 sets principles, guidelines and policy recommendations for social policies to build more inclusive and equal societies to address challenges related to digital and new technologies in education, capacity-building, inequality and social inclusion.

To close the digital divide, Governments are encouraged to further strengthen cooperation at all levels and with all relevant stakeholders. This includes robust public-private partnerships to set up more robust infrastructure, conducive and inclusive regulatory frameworks, including taxation systems, and a platform to facilitate knowledge-sharing. For instance, since 2015, ESCAP has worked with Member States to develop the Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (AP-IS) by improving regional broadband connectivity, increasing international bandwidth for developing countries, lowering broadband prices and bridging the digital divide.