


COMMISSION for SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Headquarters, New York



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Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



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Fifty-ninth Session of the Commission for Social Development

Multi-stakeholder Forum on the priority theme:

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

Friday, 12 February 2021, 3:00 - 5:00 pm
(Virtual Meeting)

Chair’s Summary

The Commission for Social Development held a multi-stakeholder Forum on the priority theme, “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”, on 12 February 2021. The keynote speaker was **H.E. Asmundur Einar Dadason**, Minister of Children and Social Affairs of Iceland. The panelists were: **Ms. Vanesa Wainstein**, Special Advisor on International Affairs of the Minister of Social Development of Argentina; **Mr. Xing Wei**, Director of the Social Affairs Department of the Institute of Social Development, NDRC of China; **Ms. Susan Segal**, President and CEO, Americas Society and Council of the Americas; **Ms. Komal Ahmad**, Founder and President of Copia; and **Ms. Taliah Drayak**, Co-founder of the International Parent Advocacy Network and the Parents, Families and Allies Network. **Ms. Deborah D. Stine**, President of Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy Analysis & Education, LLC, moderated the panel.

Call for digital inclusion

In a world where there is a widening digital gap, equal access to digital technologies and digital inclusion is a prerequisite for a new social contract. Equal access to digital technologies plays a key role in securing social inclusion, decent work and well-being of all. In order to achieve this, the international community, national and local governments, the private sector, academia, civil society organizations, disadvantaged social groups, and philanthropic institutions need to work as one. Internet connectivity is not the end in itself – rather, it is a crucial means to ensure dignity, empowerment and opportunities for all. Member States have an obligation to reduce barriers, implement inclusive social policies in order to close the digital divide and ensure that no one is left offline.

The crisis has revitalized the public debate on the digital divide and brought to the fore its detrimental consequences for both individuals and societies. For example, parents, without access to the Internet, struggle to file documents to be submitted to the family court. The COVID-19 has exposed that, even with well-designed policies, social services were hard to reach the beneficiaries if they are not connected. Without the first access point, people are excluded from all the other potential benefits. Expanding access to digital devices and the Internet to all people therefore will play a vital role in boosting recovery and ensuring no one is left behind.

While digital technologies bring benefits, accompanying risks must be addressed, including increased inequality, misinformation, changes to the world of work, and the Internet's 'dark web'. The COVID-19 pandemic can provide a window of opportunity to create lasting change *vis-à-vis* bridging the digital divide. Digital inclusion and access to digital technologies is a human right which can create opportunities for the citizenry and should be viewed as a new path enabling individuals to move out of poverty.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, policy response and digital solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only shone a light on high levels of inequalities that exist across regions but has also exacerbated them. Persons with disabilities, older persons, women and young people continue to be severely affected by the pandemic. Children are among those who carry the heaviest burden during this global crisis, specifically the children who were vulnerable before the pandemic began. Argentina has implemented a series of inclusive social policies, including a national food card scheme which helped 11 million people, mostly women and children, to get food assistance using digital technology.

Digital technologies have helped ensure equal access to social services and enhance well-being. China has promoted ICT development, including in schools, elderly care facilities and sports centres, which has expanded the supply of public social service resources (e.g. digital libraries, virtual museums and other cultural events). China has also improved the match between resources and demand, for example, by opening cloud platforms to students to support their home study. The development of a digitally integrated network of remote service systems, such as Internet hospitals or tele-medicine networks, can close rural-urban gaps in public service delivery.

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls with regard to education, work, family and care-giving responsibilities, financial inclusion, gender-based violence and human trafficking. In the Latin America and Caribbean region, the labour force participation of women contracted 10.4 per cent in 2020 and women continue to struggle to gain access to finances to start a business. In the region where 126 million women work in the informal sector which has been hit hard, 39 per cent of women closed businesses, compared to 29 per cent of men. Women's economic gains in recent years are being lost, impacting productivity and economic growth in the region. Without bringing women back into the workforce, inclusive recovery is deemed difficult.

Governments and the private sector must work together to address these challenges. To get more women and young people into the workforce, governments can work with the private sector on job training and creation. Incentives should be created to ensure that companies hire and train more women and promote flexible work arrangements. Governments should also invest in providing all children with access to technology and provide youth with digital and STEM skills, especially for girls. It is important to ensure that gains made towards gender equality are not eroded as digital technology can become a tool that perpetuates gender-based discrimination and violence.

Solutions for a better recovery

A socially just transition towards sustainable development must involve a new way of thinking about economic activity and growth as a means to achieve sustainable advances of human well-being. This requires a change in mindset and a shift away from standard narrow measures of economic growth towards a rebalancing of economic, social and environmental perspectives. Sustainable investment in social inclusion and equality calls for resources and political commitment. In this context, investment in social protection can be one of the most profitable investments governments and societies can make. As we build back better and re-design policies to secure greater well-being and equality using the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as blueprint, it is important to work together across private and public sectors and with all levels of governments in order to capitalize on synergies.

Digital technologies, including AI and big data, can help secure improved access to and better coverage of basic public services, including education, health services, elderly care, childcare, and cultural and sport activities. They can also help in addressing the unbalanced allocation of public service resources between urban and rural areas. The gap in digital infrastructure between urban and rural areas needs to be addressed. Similarly, advances in digital technology also expand the supply of digital public resources. Digital technologies can better promote the openness and sharing of data in the public service arena and improve the efficiency of data resource utilization.

Plans to bridge the digital divide should be a part of the national strategies to recover better from COVID-19 and work towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a window of opportunity to incorporate sustainability into all sectors of the economy and all areas of public policy. The digital economy should support social development and digital technologies should be leveraged to further advance the well-being of all. The Global South is seeking to better integrate digital technologies into the labour market and use them to disseminate knowledge, in particular traditional knowledge of the Latin America and the Caribbean region.

In addition to practical solutions leveraging digital technology seen in the examples in the previous section of this summary, digital technologies can play a pivotal role in ensuring that food is not wasted, and thus be part of the solution to solve global hunger and poverty. The panel showcased a successful local initiative that bridges the gap between those who have excess food and access to technology and those without, directly connecting both sides of the market. Digital

finance can boost equitable social development and promote women's economic empowerment. Member States were encouraged to build a better post-COVID-19 world and ensure that every person can lead a decent life with dignity and provide for their families. Examples of national strategies to increase digital access to public services (including education, health) were shared, as well as experiences of COVID-19 response and recovery measures. Recognizing the importance that all segments of society have access to digital technology to advance social development, participants called on UN entities, NGOs and other partners to develop successful policies and strategies to bridge the digital divide and ensure that no one is left behind.