



**Draft Aide-Memoire**

Expert Group Meeting on  
**“Socially just transition towards sustainable development:  
the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”**

In collaboration with UNCTAD and ITU

4 – 7 August 2020

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**I. Purpose of the meeting**

By decision E/2020/26 E/CN.5/2020/7, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations decided that the priority theme for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission for Social Development to be held in February 2021 shall be “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: The role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”. To this effect, an Expert Group Meeting is convened in preparation for the fifty-ninth session of the Commission, which is expected to produce a negotiated policy outcome (a resolution) on the priority theme.

The Commission, as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council, serves as the main United Nations forum for an intensified global dialogue on social development issues and in promoting the integrated treatment of social development issues in the United Nations system. It continues to have the primary responsibility to review, on a periodic basis, issues related to the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development. Furthermore, the Commission will, within its mandate, make a vital contribution to the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by supporting the thematic reviews of the high-level political forum on sustainable development on progress on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, including cross-cutting issues.

The outcomes of the meeting will contribute to the work of the Commission by providing concrete, evidence-based recommendations on policies for enabling a socially just transition towards sustainable development, with a focus on the role of digital technologies. The meeting is also expected to provide inputs to the report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme.

**II. Background**

**A socially just transition towards sustainable development**

By adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States committed to achieving sustainable development for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. The Agenda is based on the ideals of inclusiveness and shared prosperity and Member States pledged to leave no one behind

and to endeavor to reach the furthest behind first. With 10 years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda, addressing the inter-linkages between social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development will require pursuing a socially just transition that is people-centered and grounded in the principle of social justice. This rests on two key elements.

First, a socially just transition to sustainable development entails a re-thinking of economic activity so that it is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means for sustainably advancing human well-being and capabilities. This shift in thinking is behind the growing body of research on well-being metrics that go beyond GDP to include, *inter alia*, multiple dimensions of inequality and subjective well-being. Achieving inclusive and equitable growth is central to eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities, promoting decent work, fostering social inclusion, and advancing well-being.

Second, a socially just transition rests on a shift away from patterns of economic growth, production and consumption that deplete global environmental commons and endanger livelihoods, towards a resource-efficient economy that minimizes risks to human well-being and the environment, and preserve ecosystems, which are deteriorating at an unprecedentedly fast rate in the past fifty years. Current human activities are “eroding the very foundations of our livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide”<sup>1</sup>. A transformation in societal values and behaviors is critical to change the incentives for expanding economic activity at the cost of environmental harm.

This transition will entail costs of adjustment as well as benefits. For example, jobs in certain polluting sectors will be phased out while new jobs are created in greener industries. Some workers who suffer unemployment may not be able to fill in the new jobs due to skill mismatch. A people-centred approach to development can make this paradigm shift possible and inclusive. Social policy has a significant role in rectifying imbalances and achieving inclusive, equitable, and sustainable growth. When well-designed, social policy can strengthen human capacity and resilience by improving access to basic services and productive resources and enhancing skills and well-being. As countries accelerate their transition towards a fairer, greener and more digital and sustainable economy, social policies, including innovative social protection policies and measures, in coordination with labour, science and technology and innovation, ICTs policies, need to be strengthened to protect those who may be negatively affected.

Technological advances hold the promise of facilitating a necessary transition towards sustainable development, by revolutionizing food and energy security as well as improving access to healthcare, education and financial inclusion, amongst other things. In particular, digital technologies can create opportunities for a win-win or triple-win situation<sup>2</sup>, thus effectively address inter-linkages among various SDGs. For example, agricultural productivity can be enhanced by the strategic deployment of new technologies – from advanced water use sensors to climate-smart agriculture, to renewable energy technologies. The Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD)<sup>3</sup>, Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals (STI Forum), the

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<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The global assessment report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019)

<sup>2</sup> See UNCTAD (2019) Digital Economy Report 2019 and Technology and Innovation Report 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The Commission is one of the ECOSOC functional commissions. It serves as the UN focal point for science, technology and innovation (STI) for development. It also plays a unique role in the system-wide follow-up to the World Summit on the Information Society.

World Summit on the Information Society Forum (WSIS Forum) and the AI for Good Summit are an important arena supporting the role of technological advances in implementation of the SDGs.

Today, the economic and social fallouts of the COVID-19 pandemic are having a dramatic impact on social development and well-being worldwide. The crisis risks reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty and exacerbating already high levels of inequality. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis provides the opportunity to rethink existing socio-economic policy frameworks in order to 'rebuild better'. It has sparked a global dialogue on ways forward out of the crisis to build more inclusive and equitable societies by aligning policy frameworks with the vision and overarching objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### **Rebuilding better - the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being**

COVID-19 is the first pandemic in history where information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media are being used on a massive scale, driving the global collective response to the disease, thus, highlighted the fundamental importance of ICTs. The crisis has also demonstrated the critical role of digital technologies in protecting the well-being of people – from fighting the spread of the virus through continued access to healthcare (e-health and telemedicine); sustaining daily life through teleworking and continued access to education (remote-schooling and learning); supporting business continuity and access to essential goods and services through e-commerce, e-transactions and innovative ways of connecting supply and demand (food-delivery, etc.); and keeping people, family and friends socially connected via video-conferencing among others. Digital technologies are also expected to play an essential role in rebuilding our societies during recovery. As the world moves past the initial response phase, the COVID-19 crisis could accelerate the pace of the fourth industrial revolution by advancing automation, digitalization, and technological innovation.

Yet, still today, a little over half of the world's population uses the Internet. The full potential of ICTs can only be realized when everyone is connected. We need to ensure that the digital infrastructure, services, and applications that have proved fundamental in this crisis benefit everyone so that we leave no one behind as we recover from the pandemic.

However, rapid technological changes, with little strategic directionality towards inclusive and sustainable development, may entrench existing inequalities or/and introduce new ones. For example, existing digital divides between and within countries (rural-urban, old-young, women-men) in terms of unequal access to digital infrastructure, ICTs, and scientific and technological research capacities, may be further exacerbated. COVID-19 has also strongly exposed workplace inequalities, between workers engaged in telework and making use of digital tools and those that cannot. Moreover, new challenges are emerging, including the phenomenon known as "winner takes all", data governance related to privacy and data protection, online safety and security, and misinformation and disinformation, algorithmic discrimination or bias, and unequal representation and participation in the technology sector. Public policy has a crucial role to play in mitigating these risks and their social consequences.

At the confluence of two phenomena – the emerging spirit of solidarity to 'rebuild better' and the accelerated pace of digital transformation – is a unique window of opportunity to discuss how to ensure

that digital technologies contribute to social development and well-being of all, and facilitate an inclusive and equitable transition to achieve sustainable development, with leaving no one behind.

Addressing evidence-based recommendations on policies for enabling a socially just transition towards sustainable development, with a focus on the role of digital technologies, assists Member States in implementing various SDGs, including Goal 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 16.

### Objectives, Key Questions and Methodology

The expert group meeting aims to review what it takes to enable a socially just transition towards sustainable development and examine the role of digital technologies to facilitate a transition that is inclusive and more equitable. The meeting will:

- Identify existing gaps and priority areas to enable socially just transition for intervention and make specific policy recommendations in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- Discuss specific strategies and policies that have proven successful in advancing social development and well-being of all during the transition towards sustainable development at global, regional and national levels;
- Examine the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on social development and how digital technologies can contribute to preserving progress made so far and help to get back on track in achieving inclusive and sustainable development for all, with leaving no one behind;
- Explore measures to support the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation across domains and across borders to realizing the transformational potential of digital technologies towards a socially just transition to sustainable development.

All of the above will facilitate the deliberations of the Commission for Social Development at its fifty-ninth session and the 2021 High-level Political Forum under the theme of “Human wellbeing and the SDGs: Recovering after the COVID-19 crisis (SDGs: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 16, and 17)” (TBC in July 2020). Experts will have the opportunity to engage in open and inclusive discussions through various sessions.

To accomplish these objectives, the meeting will bring together experts from academia, national governments, civil society, and the UN system. Presentations by experts will focus on the following:

- What it will take to enable a socially just transition towards sustainable development?
- What policies and measures are necessary to ensure that no one is left behind in the global transition to a more inclusive and resource-efficient economy?
- What is the role of digital technologies in a socially just transition?
- What is the role of social policies in leveraging the benefits, while mitigating the adverse impacts brought on by the accelerated pace of digital transformation due to the COVID-19 crisis?
- What are effective policies that have proven to be effective in reducing/redressing the digital divide between and within countries, including gender, age, disability, and other social digital divides?

- What institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks and measures have been effective in mitigating the rise in inequalities associated with digital technologies? How can we measure inequality created by digital technologies?
- What forms of domestic interventions or international cooperation would be necessary to enable developing countries to leverage digital technologies for social development?
- How can we build effective public-private partnerships to further the role of digital technologies for social development and well-being? What specific monitoring and accountability measures can be put in place within companies or promoted across specific industries?

#### IV. Expected outputs

The meeting is expected to provide substantive input for the preparation of the report of the Secretary-General on “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all” to be submitted to the fifty-ninth session of the Commission for Social Development. In addition, the meeting will also produce the following outputs:

- i. Substantive papers on the theme of the meeting, with concrete policy recommendations, prepared by experts;
- ii. A meeting report, prepared by UNDESA, summarizing the deliberations of the experts and key recommendations, which will serve as key inputs to Secretary-General’s Report.

#### V. Organizational and administrative matters

The Expert Group Meeting will be held virtually and is scheduled to take place **from 4 – 7 August 2020**. About 14 – 15 experts and 16 – 18 resource persons/discussants will be identified and invited by the Division for Inclusive Social Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, taking into consideration gender and geographical balances.

To mitigate the challenge of time difference, the virtual EGM will be conducted over 4 consecutive days, (from 8-10am NYT), with parallel break-out sessions (one to bring regional perspectives, and another to enable focused discussion on sub-themes).

The Secretariat will provide a preliminary list of substantive issues that will be described in an annotated agenda of the expert group meeting. Prior to the meeting, the invited experts will be required to submit short written papers (5-10 pages in length, in English) to the United Nations Secretariat **by 27 July 2020**. All papers and presentations should be sent to **Ms. Makiko Tagashira** ([tagashira@un.org](mailto:tagashira@un.org)) and **Ms. Isabelle Deganis** ([isabelle.deganis@un.org](mailto:isabelle.deganis@un.org)), with a copy to **Mr. Joshua del Duca** ([delduca@un.org](mailto:delduca@un.org)).

In addition to the invited experts, the representatives of UNDESA, UNCTAD, ITU and other UN entities, and representatives from the civil society will participate.

The meeting will be in plenary for the opening and concluding sessions, and in two break-out sessions for regional and thematic discussions. The invited experts will present their papers which will be

followed by interactive discussions. At the conclusion of the meeting, participants will endorse the major conclusions and recommendations of the meeting. A final report will be produced after the meeting.

## **VI. Documentation and Language of the meeting**

The documentation of the meeting will be comprised of relevant publications, documents and materials related to the theme of the meeting, which will be made available on the web site to be created for the meeting. The expert papers will be posted on the web site.

The working language of the meeting will be English. Documentation for the meeting will be provided in English.

