



COMMISSION for SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Headquarters, New York

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United Nations
Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



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59th 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, 3:00pm – 5:00 pm
Virtual

Draft Concept Note



1. Background and context

The ECOSOC, in its resolution 2019/4, on future organization and methods of work of the Commission for Social Development, “Invites the Bureau of the Commission to continue to propose interactive dialogues that engage Member States and relevant stakeholders, so as to encourage dialogue and enhance the impact of its work, including by addressing the implementation of, follow-up to and review of the social dimension of the 2030 Agenda” (para 10).

Social progress towards improvement in people’s wellbeing is at the heart of sustainable development. In recent decades, many countries have enjoyed sustained periods of economic growth, which enhanced living standards and lifted people out of extreme poverty. Yet, between 1990 and 2016, income inequality increased in 49 out of 191 countries. Today more than two thirds of the global population reside in countries where inequality has grown. High inequality is associated with lower productivity, reduced prosperity, and slowed poverty reduction. Inequality also lowers public support for environmental protection, due to social polarization and lack of trust in public institutions.

A socially just transition towards sustainable development requires a change in mindset from pursuing narrow short-term economic/material gains towards re-balancing economic, social and environmental objectives to build a common sustainable future for all. The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to reset socio-economic policies to build back better to enable a socially just transition towards a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable development as envisioned by the 2030 Agenda.

As governments invest in recovery measures from the COVID-19 crisis, digital technologies can facilitate this transition and create a more inclusive, accessible, equitable, resilient and sustainable society for all. Yet for all the promises that ICTs hold – improving access to healthcare through eHealth, improving access to education through remote learning, facilitating digital inclusion, promoting more environment-friendly construction at reduced cost, etc. – over half of the world’s population does not have access to the Internet. Marginalised groups are overrepresented in the offline population, which is disproportionately female, rural, poor, elderly, and with limited education or some form of disabling condition. Closing the digital divide will be central to a socially just transition towards sustainable development that benefits everyone.

These challenges are complex. Governments cannot achieve a socially just transition towards sustainable development alone, nor can they close the digital divide without partners. A whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach is needed. National and local governments, public institutions, the international community, United Nations entities, the private sector, academia, the science, technology and innovation (STI) community, civil society organizations, disadvantaged social groups, and philanthropic and religious organizations, among others, need to work together in a complementary manner, each in their own competence and bringing their specific perspectives and capabilities.

2. Objectives

The panel will focus on sharing concrete solutions to challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis (at regional, national and local levels), including those leveraging digital technologies. Panellists will also identify challenges, opportunities, lessons learned, good practices and innovative approaches in achieving a socially just transition towards sustainable development.

Taking a whole-of-society approach, the panel aims to learn from successful strategies and practices and hear the voices of multi-stakeholders to share practical solutions.

More specifically, the forum aims to:

- a. Share knowledge and experiences on how different stakeholders can support governments to design and implement policies that help countries to recover better and enable a socially just transition towards a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable development, as envisioned by the 2030 Agenda.
- b. Share lessons learned of how stakeholders can work with governments to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits that digital technologies can bring to promote social development and well-being of all.
- c. Share knowledge, experience and innovative approaches to using ICTs for social development and to address the pressing challenges posed by COVID-19, including through improving access to healthcare, education and food, amongst others.
- d. Examine how stakeholders can work together to address the digital divide and promote digital inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalized groups and communities.

3. Structure and format of the panel discussion

The panel discussion will be chaired by the Chair of the Commission for Social Development. The Chair will open the session with brief remarks and invite the keynote speakers to make a **10 minutes** presentation. After these keynote statements, the Chair will introduce the moderator and the moderator will introduce panellists. (**7-minute** presentations, addressing the guiding questions). Following these presentations, the moderator will invite questions directly related to the presentations from the audience/participants. After a short question and answer session, the moderator will open the floor for interactive dialogue.

Panellists are expected to present concrete strategies that have proven to be successful in shaping a socially just transition towards a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable development and/or leveraging the role of digital technologies to advance social development and well-being of all for achieving the 2030 Agenda. They are invited to highlight innovative approaches and lessons learned.

The outcomes of the discussions will be reflected in the Chair's summary, which will be one of the key inputs of the Commission for Social Development to the ECOSOC, in particular, its high-level segment and the 2021 High-Level Political Forum.

4. Guiding questions

The Commission for Social Development may wish to consider the following questions in its deliberations on the priority theme at its fifty-ninth session:

- i. What role do broad-based partnerships have in ensuring that no one is left behind in the global transition towards sustainable development? Any specific suggestions to improve such partnerships?
- ii. How can we create a common space where Governments, civil society organisations, academia, the STI community, and the private sector can bring their perspectives, innovative ideas/solutions, and collective forces, to enable a socially just transition towards sustainable development (e.g., enable equitable and inclusive growth, reduce inequalities, preserve natural resources and the environment, promote sustainable production and consumption patterns, etc.)?
- iii. How can various stakeholders, including the private sector, work with governments to ensure that technologies are not reproducing and exacerbating (in their design and use) pre-existing inequalities and discriminations?
- iv. Based on your experience, what measures/programmes should be in place at local, national and international levels, in order to maximize the benefits digital technologies that bring, while minimizing the risks they may pose? What measures could help close the digital divide?

The time allocation for the panel discussion is as follows:

Speaker	Suggested speaking time
Chair: Opening remarks and the introduction of panellists	3 minutes
Keynote speakers	10 minutes each
Moderator: introduction/context-setting	5 minutes
Panellists (6): Presentations	7 minutes per panellist
Moderated interactive discussion	Q & A and open dialogue with participants of the Commission (Interventions limited to 3 minutes per speaker) (30 minutes)
Concluding remarks by moderator and Closing by the Chair	5 minutes
	Total duration: 2 hours