



COMMISSION for SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Headquarters, New York

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Department of
Economic and
Social Affairs



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59th Session of the Commission for Social Development

High-level panel discussion on the priority theme “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”

Monday, 8 February 2021, 3:00pm – 5:00 pm
Virtual

Draft Concept Note



1. Background

The Commission for Social Development will hold its fifty-ninth session from 8 to 17 February 2020 under the priority theme of “**Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all**”. The theme was decided by ECOSOC in its decision 2020/212.

In its decision, ECOSOC also affirmed that the Commission will contribute to the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by supporting the thematic reviews of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Council further reaffirmed that the Commission shall continue to review issues related to the follow-up and implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at the World Summit for Social Development and advise the Council thereon.

The meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2021 convened under the auspices of ECOSOC, will be held from 6 – 15 July 2021 and will include a three-day ministerial segment of the forum. The theme will be “*Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development*”.

The high-level panel discussion on the priority theme in an integral part of the Commission’s deliberation to assess progress in the implementation of the commitments of the World Social Summit. Within its mandate, the Commission will provide policy guidance based on discussions and sharing of national experiences to promote sustainable, inclusive and resilient development for all. The outcome of this panel discussion, together

with that of the general discussion and the expected resolution on the priority theme will contribute to the work of the ECOSCO and the 2021 HLPF.

The High-level Panel will be held virtually on Monday, 8 February 2021 from 3:00pm to 5:00pm.

2. Context -- Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all

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. World leaders recognized that the **current trajectory of economic development has not led to shared prosperity for all**, but to high and rising inequalities in many countries, the climate crisis, and unsustainable consumption and production patterns. The 2030 Agenda is based on the ideals of inclusiveness and shared prosperity and Member States pledged to leave no one behind and to endeavour 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-centred and grounded in the principles of social justice.

Compounding already existing challenges, 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. The recovery from the COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to reset socio-economic policies to help countries to build back better. .

A socially just transition towards sustainable development entails a **re-thinking of economic activity** not as an end in itself, but rather as a means for sustainably advancing human well-being and capabilities. It requires a change in mindsets from pursuing narrow short-term economic/material gains towards re-balancing economic, social and environmental objectives to build a common sustainable future for all. 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 on inequality and subjective well-being. Alternative **models of growth for sustainable development** offer rich and promising perspectives, for instance, Inclusive Green Economy, the Social Solidarity Economy, and the Circular Economy.

To enable a socially just transition, the **resilience of individuals and societies** needs to be strengthened. This requires investing in people's capacity and equipping them with the skills and resources to withstand economic, social and environmental risks and shocks. **Social protection systems**, particularly social protection floors, play a key role in facilitating a just transition, building resilience, and reducing inequality and poverty, and promoting inclusive growth. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed serious social coverage gaps in social protection systems worldwide and prompted governments extend coverage and improve benefits, albeit temporarily.

The role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all

Digital technologies can facilitate this transition and create a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable society for all. The digital revolution has already brought tremendous benefits to socio-economic development and improved the quality of life for many by improving access to education and eHealth, enhancing productivity in the world of work, improving efficiency of agri-food systems, and boosting financial inclusion.

As the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the pace of digital transformation, it has also revitalized the global debate on the digital divide. **Leaving no one behind means leaving no one offline:** yet, half of the world's population, as estimated 3.6 billion people, does not use the Internet and fail to reap the benefits of new technologies and the Internet. Already disadvantaged and marginalized groups are overrepresented in the offline population, which is disproportionately, female, rural, poor, elderly, and with limited education and low literacy. The full potential of ICTs can only be realized when everyone is connected. Closing the digital divide and ensuring the digital inclusion of marginalised groups requires working on many fronts, notably, improving access to ICT infrastructures, improving affordability, investing in digital skills, improving awareness of the benefits of being connected and providing relevant content in local languages. The ITU estimates that \$428 billion to get everyone online by 2030.¹

3. Objectives

Drawing on research and national experiences, the high-level panel discussion will seek to make recommendations on effective policies for a socially just transition towards sustainable development in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Discussions will focus on policies and strategies that have proven to be successful in producing more inclusive, equitable and resilient growth and development, as well as the barriers (social, economic, cultural, legal, etc.) to a socially just transition sustainable development, at the global, regional and national levels. Further, the discussion will aim to deepen the understanding of the benefits, opportunities and potential risks brought by the accelerated pace of digital transformation.

With this in view, the key objectives of the high-level panel discussion include:

- a. Share knowledge and experiences on how countries can design and implement policies that are aligned with models of equitable and inclusive growth for sustainable development (for instance, green economy, social and solidarity economy, circular economy).
- b. Share lessons learned by governments that pursue nationally defined social protection floors to ensure access to healthcare, child benefits, and basic income security across a life cycle.
- c. Examine the impact of measures taken by governments to extend social protection coverage and/or improve the benefits in response to the COVID-19 crisis and examine whether these (often) temporary measures could form the basis for strengthening national social protection systems in the longer term.
- d. Share examples and experiences of the innovative use of digital technologies for social development and well-being of all, including measures taken during COVID-19 to enhance digital access to healthcare, education, financial inclusion, amongst others.

¹ [ITU 2020](#)

- e. Analyze the determinants of the digital divide for different vulnerable populations, (including people living in poverty, rural and remote areas, women and girls, older persons, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities) and discuss how to promote their digital inclusion.

4. Structure and format of the panel discussion

The Chair will open the session with brief remarks and introduce the keynote speaker. The Chair will then invite the keynote speaker to deliver an address on the topic of the session (**about 10 minutes**). After the keynote address, the Chair will introduce the moderator. The moderator will introduce the panellists and invite them to make **7 minutes** presentations. Following their 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. Invited panellists will include high-level government officials, subject experts from academia and think-tanks, as well as from civil society, taking into consideration gender and geographical balance.

Panellists are expected to structure their presentations around concrete policies and strategies that have proven to be effective in shaping a socially just transition towards a more inclusive, equitable, resilient and sustainable development and tackling the digital divide to ensure that everyone benefits from the digital transformation.. 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.

Guiding questions

- i. What policies and measures are necessary to ensure that adjustment costs of the transition to sustainable development are equitably shared within society? How can we protect those who are vulnerable and at risk of being left behind during the transition?
- ii. How can we design and implement policies that are aligned with models of more inclusive and equitable growth? (green growth, more sustainable consumption and production patterns, promote well-beings, etc.)
- iii. What interplays exist between socio-economic inequalities and the digital divide and how can we address both simultaneously?
- iv. What policies and strategies are necessary at the global, regional and national levels to address the digital divide, including in relation to gender, age, geographical location, disability, and other determinants of digital exclusion?
- v. What can governments do to ensure adequate financial investment in basic public services and social protection systems at a time when COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on public balance sheets ?

The time allocation for the panel discussion is as follows:

Speaker	Suggested time
Chair: Opening remarks and the introduction of the keynote speaker	5 minutes
Keynote speaker	10 minutes
Moderator: introduction/context-setting	5 minutes
Panellists (4 - 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