**Fifty-ninth 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 2020, 3:00pm – 5:00pm**
**(Virtual meeting)**

**Chair's Summary**

The Commission for Social Development held a 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" on 8 February 2021.

The panel was opened by **H.E. Ms. Maria del Carmen Squeff,** the Chair of the 59th session of the Commission. **Dr. Peter Major**, Chair of the twenty-fourth session of the Commission for Science and Technology for Development was a keynote speaker. The panelists were **H.E. Ms. Karen Abudinen**, Minister for Information and Communication Technologies of Colombia; **H.E. Ms. Ana Mendes Godinho**, Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security of Portugal; **H.E. Ms. Silvana Vargas**, Minister of Development and Social Inclusion of Peru; **Mr. Boris Zürcher**, Head of the Labour Directorate at the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, Federal Department of Economics, Education and Research of Switzerland; **Ms. Elsa Marie D'Silva**, Founder & CEO of Red Dot Foundation and President of Red Dot Foundation Global. The panel was moderated by **Ms. Francesca Spatolisano**, Assistant-Secretary-General of UNDESA.

**A socially just transition towards sustainable development requires a holistic and multifaceted approach**

The COVID-19 crisis risks reversing decades of progress made in the field of social development. The world needs a fair and inclusive recovery that benefits everyone. Women and girls have been particularly hard hit by the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. As countries emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, the promotion of human rights and gender equality should be central to recovery efforts. Similarly, transitions towards sustainable development should not increase social inequality, and benefits and transition costs should be equitably distributed.

Holistic and multifaceted strategies can help ensure a socially just transition towards sustainable development. This involves governments and other stakeholders working on several fronts. Firstly, promote full employment and decent work for all by securing stable economic conditions, establishing active labour market policies, investing in skills and life-long learning in line with labour market needs, espousing flexible labour market legislation, and promoting social dialogue. The ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) provides a blueprint for achieving these goals. Secondly, establish inclusive and sustainable social protection systems that are adapted to the changing world of work, notably the 'gig economy', and responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups. Newly enacted social protection measures and existing systems have had an important role in sustaining the livelihoods of those hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis. In Luxembourg, for example, the government extended the coverage of 'partial unemployment' and established compensation for loss of revenue to businesses. Thirdly, put in place long-term social policies/programmes and promote social innovation (such as the Social Innovation Laboratory in Peru) that embrace a life-cycle approach and are adapted to the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Fourthly, support cooperation and collective action at all levels, including inter-ministerial cooperation at the national level, to ensure that no one is left behind.

Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is integral to achieving the SDGs and supporting a socially just transition towards sustainable development. Incorporating gender analysis into the design and evaluation of policies and programs carries enormous potential. Girls aspire to more but, in many cases, they are unable to access the education that they need to realize their full potential. The COVID-19 crisis risks reversing progress in women's rights and opportunities. Women have been disproportionately affected by the crisis as they are over-represented in some of the hardest hit sectors, have more limited access to social protection systems, and have taken on an even greater share of unpaid and unrecognized domestic and care work. COVID-19 also sparked a 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence. Rates of domestic violence, online harassment, child abuse, and abuse directed at LGBTI persons increased dramatically during the lockdown. Digital technologies have helped to make the taboo topic of sexual and gender-based violence more visible by crowdsourcing anonymous personal stories and data and making them available in open-source format.

### Digital technologies can support recovery and help realize the 2030 Agenda

Digital technologies played a critical role in the COVID-19 response by enabling remote work, remote learning and delivery of essential goods and services. They can re-activate the economy and drive socio-economic transformation, increase productivity, and enhance connectivity between national and international economies. Countries are establishing national strategies to support their digital economies. For instance, 'Digital Morocco 2020' aims to accelerate Morocco's digital transformation and enhance its position internationally in the field of information technology. In Senegal, the 'Digital Strategy 2025' was established as a catalyst to modernize the country's economy and improve its competitiveness. E-commerce can support economic development and provide new income opportunities. Countries, including Colombia, are supporting entrepreneurs and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (including in the informal sector) to develop their digital expertise, engage in E-commerce, and formalize through online platforms.

Digital technologies have a critical role to play in implementing the 2030 Agenda, as well as other development agendas such as the African Agenda 2063. Digital technologies have

shown to have great potential for improving people's lives and protecting the planet. A recent notable example is the application of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data during the COVID-19 pandemic for fast tracking the development of vaccines, monitoring the outbreak, tracing cases of the disease, predicting its evolution and assessing infection risks. Countries should ensure that everyone, especially the poorest, can benefit from the ingenuity of science and technology.

Yet, for all their advantages and potential, digital technologies alone cannot solve complex issues, such as hunger, poverty, inequality or environmental challenges. Rather, they are one of the tools to address the root causes of these challenges. While digital technologies can accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs, connect people, build capacity and drive accountability, unconscious bias and social cultural norms can cause them to reinforce exclusion and biases. Societies need to guard against such risks and engage in a public debate about the risks and ethics surrounding the use of digital technologies. Countries should set priorities to drive digital transformation by developing and matching digital innovation strengths to social and business needs. Such policies should be context- and country-specific. The Commission on Science and Technology Development (CSTD) plays a critical role in this respect.

## Digital technologies can improve public service delivery and support more efficient policymaking

Countries are taking steps to modernize public administration and promote digital tools in policymaking and service delivery. To promote more effective and efficient digital-government, national policymakers are also taking measures to reduce red tape and excessive bureaucratic processes. Digital technologies can support differentiated, locally relevant, bottom-up policies. In Peru, for instance, digital inclusion facilitates access to more precise and exact information with a stronger territorial focus, allowing decision-makers to make more timely, appropriate, socially relevant decisions.

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the digitalization of the delivery of essential public services, including remote learning and health services. In Peru, mobile phones and AI are being used for the rapid identification of anemia in children and new technologies are helping remote populations of the Andean region to care for livestock in the face of adverse climate conditions. Likewise, in Senegal, digital technologies have been used to support remote learning, and SMS technology is being used to increase awareness of protective measures and enable a digital alert system linked to COVID-19.

Digital technologies are helping to improve the delivery and coverage of social protection programs, including to marginalized or vulnerable populations such as people living in rural and remote areas, indigenous peoples, older persons, children and women in poor communities, and persons with disabilities. In Peru, for instance, a conditional cash transfer program uses a remote sensing database to identify women who are eligible to receive support. Digital technologies can improve social protection coverage by maintaining or improving national registries and providing timely disbursement of support. In Brazil, for example, a digital platform (an app and a website) was used to reach beneficiaries that were not part of government registries for social programs, thus making them 'visible' to government services.

## Closing the digital divide and promoting digital inclusion is a priority

Closing the digital divide and getting everyone online is central to ensuring a socially just transition towards sustainable development and leaving no one behind. Countries are putting in place national connectivity plans to ensure that everyone reaps the benefits of being connected to the Internet, including access to essential public services delivered online. For instance, Argentina launched the 2020 National Connectivity Plan. In Colombia, action is being taken to connect over 15,000 schools to the Internet often using newly built antennas in the absence of fiber optic cables in remote areas. Countries are acting on several fronts to close the digital divide. Governments, in cooperation with the private sector, are investing in infrastructure access, including fiber optic cable networks. Countries are also taking steps to make the Internet more affordable through accessible tariffs, subsidized tariffs, free access, and investing in digital skills.

Policies targeting vulnerable and marginalized groups, who are overrepresented in the offline population, can help to close the digital gap. Factors such as location, gender, age, or disability status, are predictors of access to the Internet. Digital inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups requires dedicated and tailored policies, programmes, and strategies that meet the needs of each group. For instance, persons with disabilities often face physical accessibility barriers to using digital technologies due to their impairments. Some governments are putting in place dedicated policies to combat this. In Colombia, for example, free software is provided to persons who are visually impaired or have hearing difficulties so that they have can access ICTs.

The COVID-19 crisis has increased the urgency of closing the digital gender divide to ensure that women and girls benefit equally from the opportunities available online. As education moved online, girls have been disadvantaged and discriminated against in many countries, as boys have often been given a priority to access to digital devices and the Internet. Millions of girls have since not returned to school due to the lack of access to digital devices. Colombia launched a project in 2019 to close the digital gender divide by examining the economic, cultural, educational and social needs of women and girls. Another initiative sought to encourage girls to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) by challenging stereotypes and boosting their self-esteem to excel in these fields.

## Investing in digital skills to strengthen the resilience of individuals and societies

Human resources are the cornerstone of digital transformation. Economies and labour markets are being transformed by digitization. New jobs and new sectors which require a new and dynamic set of digital and cognitive skills are rapidly emerging. Thus, investing in digital skills can improve the resilience of economies and individuals. This is particularly true of vulnerable populations who often lack the necessary digital skills for digital society and economy. For instance, young people are a lot more likely to be connected to the Internet, but they often lack the relevant digital skills required in the labour market. Governments are promoting digital talent. For instance, Colombia is investing in the training of 100,000 programmers in the period 2021-2022.

**Recommendations emerged from the panel include:**

- To ensure a socially just transition towards sustainable development, formulate holistic strategies that promote decent work, in particular, in the digital economy; establish universal social protection systems that are adapted to the changing world of work; and facilitate social innovation, knowledge sharing and the exchange of good practices at all levels.
- Equitably distribute the benefits and transition costs of digital transformations to prevent increased socio-economic inequality.
- Invest in improving digital infrastructure, access, affordability and digital skills to close the digital divide. Implement targeted policies to promote the digital inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalized groups and communities.
- Develop and match digital innovation to social and business needs, and support a whole-of-society public debate about the risks and ethics surrounding the use of digital technologies.