Economic and Social Council

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-ninth session

8–17 February 2021

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: Priority Theme: Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all

Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa del Sacro Cuore, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Congregation of the Mission, Congregations of St. Joseph, Dominican Leadership Conference, Fondazione Proclade Internazionale – Onlus, Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate, International Presentation Association, Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Salesian Missions, Inc., School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, UNANIMA International, and VIVAT International in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

The oft-referenced tagline of the Sustainable Development Goals "leave no one behind" is of special relevance to the Commission on Social Development whose mandate focuses on reduction of social inequalities along many lines in the landscape of human diversity. As members of the Justice Coalition of Religious, which unites the voices of many United Nations-accredited organisations representing Catholic Sisters, Brothers, and priests, we are particularly concerned with the latter, less frequently cited part of the tagline: Reach the furthest behind first. Our faith-based commitment to a preferential option for the poor, a core principle of Catholic Social Teaching, requires us to attune our ears and direct the work of our hands in response to the cries of the most vulnerable among us and to the natural environment. We have thus been working alongside "the furthest behind" toward sustainable development for centuries.

From this vantage point, we have witnessed pandemic lockdowns widening pre-existing socio-economic inequalities to a veritable chasm. Almost overnight, reliable access to electrical power, broadband internet, and an internet-enable device became pre-requisites for the enjoyment of many of the human rights; civil and political participation rights; and economic, social, and cultural rights that serve as the backbone of the UN System. Pivots to technology-based services have allowed for the relative continuity of many vital services and jobs for the 85% of the global-north population and the less-than-20% of the global-south population with internet access (World Social Report 2020). For those on the other side of the digital divide, however, education, employment, and participation in public life have all become less accessible than ever.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Catholic Religious congregations have adapted many of our grassroots ministries in an attempt to overcome the increasingly consequential digital divide for the marginalised communities we serve. The Sisters of the Divine Savior in Negombo, Sri Lanka, for example, have utilized a microphone system to broadcast public health information to the "Boscoputa" complex that houses 204 families of fisher folk who were displaced by tsunamis in 2004. Another Sister secured a federal grant to ensure each student at her tribal school on Lake Traverse Reservation, South Dakota, USA had access to an internet-enabled computer for ongoing access to native-language-based education. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur's Photovoltaic Project has been providing clean energy, clean water, and internet access for tens of thousands of people, including the Sisters, students, and patients in hospitals and clinics in nine remote communities in Nigeria and seven in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Still, deficiencies in electrical and digital access among the low-income, imprisoned, indigenous, migrant, rural, older persons, and youth communities have hindered many of our best efforts to reduce the inequalities they face. When the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary were forced to close their schools for marginalised populations in Zambia (girls in underserved areas of Southern Province, children with mental and physical disabilities in Choma, and children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Lusaka), unreliable electricity, lack of internet access for the majority of students and the exorbitant cost of internet and mobile data rendered any online teaching efforts impossible.

We therefore call on the agencies and Member States of the United Nations to collaborate with us in bridging the digital divide by taking the following actions:

- Scale up investment in communications infrastructure and personnel in the United Nations national offices to allow them to become communication hubs to which both government and civil society speakers may travel in order to

participate remotely in conferences being held at the UN's international offices and public hearings or consultations being facilitated by the national government.

- Extend standard time frames in which United Nations document negotiations are carried out to increase the system's receptiveness to input submitted from a wider range of contributors in remote locations.

- Establish an equitable access policy to govern technology infrastructure utilisation at United Nations offices to ensure this infrastructure is not cost prohibitive to civil society or low-income nations such that it ultimately diminishes, rather than widens gaps in representation.

- Prioritise closure of the electrical divide as a critical precondition for closure of the digital divide for the most neglected and marginalised communities. Bringing culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable electrification infrastructure and education to remote and marginalised communities will have a rapid, catalytic impact on their well-being. Even in some remote or very low-income areas, public or NGO-run technology centers could supply many people with access to internet-enabled devices and mobile or broadband or internet service, but they are held back by the unreliability of electrical power. The Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart would be eager to establish such a center for the refugee camp of 36,000 families they serve in Adjumani District, Uganda. As with other major utility and infrastructure transitions, private-sector grants and short-term public subsidies of the new utility's adoption could speed the process of bringing electrification to scale and organically reduce the cost of coverage to all localities.

- Reduce the cost barriers to broadband internet access in all localities through short-term public subsidies and private-sector grants for broadband internet coverage. For low-income communities, ensure internet-covered technology centers are available and install round-the-clock, free internet access points in public spaces. This community coverage is essential to ensure marginalized communities are able to receive services that civil society actors are equipped to provide. For example, the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, the Tamar Network in Colombia, and the Rede Um Grito Pela Vida (Cry for Life Network) of São Paulo, Brazil are ready to provide employment and education support services to trafficking survivors by video conference. The Sisters of the Divine Savior in Wisconsin, USA are attempting to provide legal aid to low-income families. The Claretian Missionaries are attempting to raise awareness to eradicate female infanticide in rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India. Many members of the populations they aim to serve do not have the internet access requisite for connection or full participation on such a platform.

- Establish technology centers within public housing for older persons, low-income families, persons with disabilities, and children in state or institutional care that are equipped with internet-enabled laptops or tablets, so that, in cases of public health emergencies when gathering in common areas is not possible, residents can sign out a community-owned device on an hourly basis. Distribute communal laptops or funds earmarked for this same purpose to supportive housing facilities run by not-for-profit institutions such as Sophia Housing, which is run by the Daughters of Wisdom in Ireland or the Louisa Children's Home run by the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Bangalore, India.

- Provide access to laptop computers or tablets in prisons and immigration detention facilities to allow their residents to retain access to chaplaincy and counseling services like those the Sisters of the Divine Savior provided in

Arizona, USA and Tel Aviv, Israel before public health circumstances precluded face-to-face visitation. Provision of religious services is recommended by the UNODC Handbook on Prisoners with Special Needs (2009). Studies have also shown faith-based support services provided during both incarceration and reentry can significantly reduce offender recidivism (Mowen, T. J., Stansfield, R., & Boman, J. H., Journal of quantitative criminology, 2018). Furthermore, UNHCR's Detention Guidelines (2012) state that detained asylum seekers must be assured the right to practice their religion and to make regular contact, including through technological means, with religious and non-governmental organisations.

- Offer digital literacy training and technical support for older persons and parents and guardians of school-age children in tandem with other essential public service access points (e.g. food pantries). This service is an essential support for children's right to quality education under remote learning conditions and must be made as conveniently accessible as possible to those struggling to meet their families' basic needs.

- Provide training for school-age children and adults on internet safety and critical reading for credible information and offer antivirus software subsidies and promotions as public health measures. Such services will be especially critical in communities where digital access is being expanded rapidly, as they will be the most vulnerable to harm by sophisticated digital viruses and criminals originating from more digitally seasoned communities.

- Establish recycling programs for the distribution of functional, used mobile phones (with and without internet capability), computers, etc. to marginalised communities.

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