



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 November 2020

English only

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 Action Lab for Development, a non-governmental organization 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Digital technology should be at the service of people, rather than people being at the service of technology”. Although digital technologies can help advance social progress, they can also pose grave threats to personal privacy, dignity and freedom, so a people-centered approach to digital transformation is critical. (*UNDESA's EGM-CSocD59-Final Report*)

Technology has great potential to promote social progress but can also exacerbate existing inequalities. Technological advances are not neutral with respect to their impact and depend on by whom, for whom, and for what purpose they are developed and deployed. They provide a plethora of opportunities as well as risks. On the one hand, digital technologies hold the promise of facilitating a transition towards sustainable development and advancing living standards and well-being for all. On the other, the rapid expansion of digital technologies gives rise to risks and unintended consequences in the context of a political economy of high market concentration and dominance by a few companies. While internationally agreed laws and treaties exist, they are not properly/effectively implemented or enforced to mitigate risks. The increased pace of digital transformation and automation risks further polarizing the labour market in both advanced and emerging economies, providing greater opportunities for highly qualified workers who can meet the new skills requirements, while those employed in more routine work are expected to be at greater risk of automation. This results to a digital divide.

The Digital divide is a major issue that urgently needs to be addressed. Digital technologies are rapidly transforming all facets of our lives. While increased adoption of digital technology help advance social progress, it can also be harmful to human rights and security, and bring grave threats to personal privacy, dignity and freedom, and, if appropriate policies to mitigate risks are not put in place and/or implemented, it could contribute to a growing divide between haves and have-nots. Socio-economic (income and non-income) inequalities are closely associated with digital inequalities, as in general the former shape the latter, which, in turn, reinforces existing inequalities thereby creating a vicious cycle. Tackling socio-economic inequalities through digital technologies, therefore, can only address the symptoms but not the root causes of inequalities.

Policies to reduce the digital divide need to be multidimensional: technological, economic, social and educational (creating awareness) and should address both socioeconomic and digital inequalities simultaneously. Until recently, policies aimed at closing the digital divide mainly focused on physical access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Now, issues such as improving digital skills, affordable access, better Internet usage opportunities or benefits, and building awareness of positive attitudes towards the Internet and regulating negative uses, are becoming increasingly important. The digital divide is a moving target and cannot be closed completely. Even when universal access to the Internet is achieved, new challenges will emerge, including control over the technology and its design, inequalities in digital skills, usage and outcomes or benefits brought by digital technology will remain and may become wider.

Tackling the digital divide is complex and requires a multi-dimensional strategy that not only focuses on improving physical access and the affordability of ICTs, but also includes investing in digital skills, promoting better internet usage to increase opportunities or benefits, building awareness of positive attitudes towards the Internet, and regulating negative uses.

Digital inclusion is fundamental to promoting equality and equity; the increasing digital divide and gender gap need to be addressed. Elements for digital

inclusion are accessibility, affordability, availability, physical and digital infrastructure, and digital skills and use.

There should be minimum standards and agreed measurements for digital inclusion. Online contents should be inclusive and representative of diversity in language and culture. A participatory approach is key for inclusive design, based on the needs and opportunities identified by and with specific social groups. Early engagement with universities, research institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector can help embed multistakeholder approaches in the development of inclusive design.

The interlinkages between innovation, structural change, and inclusion need to be rethought. Innovation can be disruptive and its benefits unevenly distributed. While inclusion has a positive impact on innovation, structural change and achieving the SDGs, it is not necessarily the case that innovation and structural change leads to inclusion.

One-size does not fit all. There is a need for flexibility in policy choices and context specific approaches (taking into account regional, national, local and community contexts) when approaching the issues linked to digital transformation, including the digital divide, digital governance, digital inclusion, partnerships and innovative approaches.

Policy Recommendations to Address the Digital Divide

Governments, the private sector, civil society organizations and international community/UN entities are encouraged to:

- In line with the UNSG's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation, the UN System organizations and entities should continue to mobilize efforts to address the challenges of poor digital infrastructure and lower levels of skills in developing countries, and to harness innovation for development. In this connection, it should continue the UN system-wide follow up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), with its core principles and action lines in terms of digital cooperation agreed by the international community.
- Strengthen and enhance the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as a multistakeholder governance group for policy dialogue on issues of Internet governance, bringing people together from various stakeholder groups as equals and provides a platform to discuss, exchange information and share good practices.
- Build capacity to produce and collect disaggregated data on the digital divide, by gender, age, geographic area, income, where relevant, disability and type of use of the Internet (e.g. informational, educational, work and career enhancing, entertainment, chat or simple communication and e-commerce) for evidence-based decision-making. In doing so, the different dimensions of inequality (such as socio-economic background, educational level, gender, territory, ethnic and racial origin, language, age, disability) and the barriers to digital inclusion need to be identified. This is important in order to develop relevant indicators and formulate evidence-based policies that address the particular situations of those who do not have access to, nor the capacity to use digital technologies.
- Ensure that the unit of analysis is not only the individual but also the family, as the impact of technologies at the family level provides an important complementary perspective to address the difficulties of appropriating digital technologies in family settings.

- In addition to improving physical access to ICTs, efforts should be made to enhance digital skills and usage, which are required to take advantage of the opportunities brought by digital technologies. In this regard, leverage the existing usage of digital technologies and digital skills (e.g. existing digital financial services) to expand into other under-utilized areas of digital skills (e.g. information skills, content creation, and programming).
 - Recognize the Internet as a public service/public good, which will help promote universal connectivity.
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