Economic and Social Council

Commission for Social Development
Fifty-ninth session
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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 Isa Viswa Prajnana Trust, 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.

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* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

Digital technologies are already playing a large role in both social and sustainable development. In many ways they have contributed to the greater good, as access to information and services becomes wider. A larger section of society has both increased economic power and a voice that it didn't have 10 or 20 years ago, but there is still far to go to reach an equitable and inclusive society. Many new technologies are promising in this regard, but at the same time we must continue to urge governments and innovators to be vigilant about digital inclusion and social justice when developing or implementing tools. An important question comes, though, in the race to that goal: are our indicators of sustainability and equity in the external world also applicable to the internal world? In other words, as cities and nations reach their objective targets, are they also making people happier and more peaceful?

The word 'well-being' in SDG 3 ("Good Health and Well-being") is one of the most significant targets but receives relatively little attention. Indeed, there is a growing global movement pushing for indicators of success beyond GDP and towards measures like happiness and well-being – from movements like the Gross National Happiness to the New Economy. All objective indicators are ultimately pursued for subjective indicators (e.g., sustainability, wealth, success, peace or balance), meaning the motivator for working towards outer global sustainability and balance is our own inner happiness, health, and peace. The digital information we receive is purportedly to benefit our subjective digital device – our inner supercomputer. Both types of devices interact with one another, but when there is an imbalance in the quality of interaction (for example, excessive radiation from a device affecting the health of the user or excessive negative information affecting mental health), the goal of well-being will not be met. When this balance is kept in mind by developers of technologies and the agencies responsible for rolling them out, the well-being of people becomes the end-goal. Therefore, we must push for equal importance given to both objective and subjective goals.

We must strive to learn more about the positive and negative impacts of all digital technologies upon society and natural world. Knowledge about technologies' application and impact is extremely important. Developers and governments need to be encouraged to acknowledge this end-goal and to ensure that all digital interactions are balanced. Governments have the responsibility to educate. Every citizen should be literate, both classically and digitally. They must also be protected from abuse and exploitation.

The purpose of life is not acquisition of knowledge alone. It requires meaningful experience and digestion of that knowledge, as well as discrimination between what types of knowledge are useful to us and which are not. If we are not happier with all our acquired knowledge, then it should be carefully considered for what purpose we have acquired it. The destination of our lives, with all this information and new capabilities, should also be clearly understood. These questions must be considered before rushing to ensure universal and equitable access. A truly sustainable approach could start by defining *for what social good* the technology is provided. The technology should lead to short-term and long-term happiness, health, well-being, sustainability, harmony and peace in both the individual and society at large. In other words, it must help us *to become better human beings*.

We recommend the Commission to consult with field experts and adopt ethical guidelines that consider the necessity, short-term and long-term effects of any new digital technology before it is rolled out to society.

We submit the following questions for consideration:

• Is it necessary?

• Whom does it benefit?

• Does it produce a balanced benefit both to the user and the world?

• What are the basic requirements for the user to receive benefit of this technology?

• Is it available and accessible to all? If not, how can it be?

• What does it replace?

• Does it exploit human weakness in any way?

• Does it harm anyone?

• What are the environmental consequences?

• Does it contribute to happiness and wellbeing of the user?

• Does it contribute to the greater good in non-economic terms (i.e., peace, harmony, health, wellbeing)?

In addition to this, we strongly recommend changes to education in the name of social development and wellbeing. It is imperative to understand the harm that comes from material obsession. The addictiveness, exploitativeness and purposelessness of some digital technologies are examples of extreme forms of this. As His Holiness Jagadguru Swami Isa says, there is a common misunderstanding that accumulation of outer information or acquisitions leads to happiness. This misunderstanding results from incomplete, or limited, education.

Education must be changed to ensure that proper perspective is built around the uses and also the hazards of digital technologies. Education must be reoriented from its currently exclusive focus towards objective knowledge (information about the world outside of oneself). Objective knowledge must be integrated with subjective knowledge and the essential correlation between the two must be comprehended. This is real and complete education, which leads to unity and harmony.

Our organization, the Isa Viswa Prajnana Trust, has been successful in providing this type of complete education in our founder's 'Education for Total Consciousness' format, and we wish to see more learners and educators benefitting from it. True and sustainable social development will take place through new generations brought up in such an empowered and enlightened way.

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