

## CIVIL SOCIETY DECLARATION

### 59th session of the UN Commission for Social Development

#### «A socially just transition to sustainable development: The role of digital technology and the well-being of all»

#### Introduction

Digital technology has shrunk the planet, galvanized voices for social change and transformed the way we live forever. By enabling access to communications and information globally, technology has opened new doors toward advancements around the world. At the same time, in the context of the pandemic that affects us all today, the systemic weaknesses of our social and economic order have been dramatically exposed, pushing hundreds of millions of individuals and families into poverty. Now more than ever, synergies to pursue and adapt to a sustainable development that leaves no one behind must be explored and put in practice.

Appropriately, the priority theme for the 59th session of the Commission on Social Development is “A Socially Just Transition to Sustainable Development: the role of digital technology and the well-being of all.” This theme stands as a recognition of the fact that, in spite of many gains in the last decade, the world community is still striving to achieve a just and sustainable path to Development and now faces the urgent need to harness the rapidly evolving new technologies for the benefit of all.

Indeed, the development and integration of technology into our daily lives must be paired with inclusive policies, adequate financing, good governance and respect for human rights and human dignity. The many benefits of digital technology cannot distract us from its most pernicious effects on social equality, justice and fundamental rights. Lack of access, agency, and representation, as well as violations of the right to privacy and exacerbation of inequality, are challenges that have to be faced without delay.

We, the representatives of civil society in this forum, amplify the many voices that are left behind because they lack access to education, health care, social services, and even digitalization itself. We call on Member States, other stakeholders and the United Nations agencies to work together, in the spirit of the Copenhagen Declaration, to find solutions to those challenges and extend the benefits of digital technology and inclusion... to all!

## **Digital Inclusion in Education and Social Protections for All**

Rapid advancement in digital technologies provides unparalleled opportunities for innovation across education, health care, and social sectors. Yet, over three billion individuals are deprived of these advantages, lacking even the most basic access to the internet particularly among women, indigenous peoples, the impoverished, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups.

Government emergency responses to COVID-19 rely on digital technology to assist with needs regarding health and social welfare. Such digital technologies have been utilized in affluent communities, overlooking the fact that many communities do not have access to the internet. This emphasizes the need for such measures to be built into permanent and integrated social protection systems, such as housing, health, education, and public services.

Digital technology is not neutral. Big data, algorithms, and artificial intelligence are informed by existing human biases and reinforce stereotypes, perpetuating discrimination and inequity. Disparities are also pervasive among existing users of digital technology. Gender biases contribute to compromised technological literacy in women, resulting in fewer women in STEM fields and less participation in innovation. Access and literacy are inextricably linked and together have the power to connect the most vulnerable communities to social benefits, culture, healthcare, and education, among much more.

## **Digital Technology and Financing for Development: Eradication of Poverty and Promotion of Equality at Global and National levels**

Financial systems affect all economic activities, from international trade and financial flows to national and local business, to personal banking transactions, remittances, and savings. The Addis Ababa Financing for Development process initiated in 2015, as an integral part of the SDGs and Agenda 2030, must now take into consideration the profound effects of both digital technology and COVID-19 on financial markets, public finance, and sustainable trade and investment. The time to act is now if we are to mitigate the global economic crisis to follow in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Poverty reduction has slowed down in the last five years, and the level of global growth is well below that needed to eradicate poverty everywhere and in all its forms. Investments that are critical in achieving a Socially Just Transition to Sustainable Development remain underfunded just as systemic risks are increasing: inequality is on the rise within and among countries, and debt burdens and capital flow volatility jeopardize earlier gains. Voluntary financial contributions and technical assistance between Members States are insufficient to ensure the full and effective implementation of previously established commitments to social development priorities: social inclusion, non-discrimination, creation of new opportunities for jobs and re-training for inclusion in the labor market.

The disruptions created by the pandemic, coupled with rapid technological change create an unprecedented opportunity to reshape and advance the Financing for Development process through resolute collective action so that no one is left behind.

### **Digital Technology and Good Governance: Creating a Legal Environment that Protects Human Rights, Respects Privacy, and Prevents Abuses**

Global digital governance must be guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the design, development, and implementation stages, to protect both people and the planet.

Effective and responsive digital governance emerges from input, active public participation and accountability to multiple stakeholders, including persons at the grassroots. Values such as inclusion, equity, security, and transparency are the underpinnings of digital governance. Continual education and skill-building to ensure meaningful participation in governance and knowledge of human rights and labour protections is of great importance moving forward. Meeting constituents' needs calls for governments to upgrade infrastructure, upskill staff, and ensure data is readily exchanged, in order to inform decisions and deliver services efficiently. The new era of digital governance should be regulated in a way that protects human rights, privacy, and prevent abuses and discrimination.



## CALL TO ACTION

In light of the above, we, civil society representatives, call upon Member States to:

- Guarantee internet connection as a fundamental right and provide appropriate funding to extend broadband internet and digital access to all, in rural and urban areas, for women and girls, elderly population, indigenous, people experiencing homelessness, people with disabilities and people living in poverty.
- Establish mechanisms that act as safeguards against biases that arise when artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms evaluate individuals' qualifications for social benefits, such as defining "social impact" statements on all applications for licenses, patents and research in the field of AI and digital technology.
- Provide digital access to social protection services for all individuals and families so that food, water, housing, energy, healthcare, education, and transportation are available to all.
- Prioritize digital literacy training for all, especially women and girls, people living in urban and remote areas, individuals and families who are living in poverty, on the street, in inadequate housing, or in slums, and for workers in obsolete work environments.
- Strengthen Financing for Development process by addressing tax havens and illicit financial flows, restructuring of sovereign debt and injecting new liquidity according to level of need in developing countries for a more equitable distribution that can ensure not only growth but resilience.
- Support technology transfer to developing countries, strengthening science and technology cooperation, promoting sustainable global and domestic investments in infrastructure capabilities.
- Support the UNSG's Roadmap on Digital Cooperation and its specific actions that would improve digital inclusion and protect human rights; to protect global internet governance and to consider not only the internet but also data and AI as digital public goods.
- Establish a digital ombudsman to further protect citizens and provide learning opportunities. Protections are particularly needed with regard to digital identity, surveillance, online harassment, content, and data.

- Heed the recommendations of The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing for Development in their 2020 report on financing sustainable development in an era of disruptive technologies and rapid innovation; bring back the notion that citizens, as owners of pensions and savings, are at the center of the economy.
- Member States, international finance and development organizations, and the industries themselves must adapt all regulatory frameworks to the new realities so that digital technologies will lead the world into a Socially Just Transition to Sustainable Development.

To conclude, if proven available technologies are mainstreamed as public goods following our calls for action, a Socially Just transition to sustainable development is possible.

We, the representatives of civil society, are truly confident in the transformational power of a Digital Technology Revolution based on human rights and dignity, and guided by the values of inclusion, equity, security and transparency.