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**Priority Theme: Socially just transition towards sustainable
development: the role of digital technologies on social
development and well-being of all**

Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, 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

The International Movement ATD Fourth World is a non-governmental organization that works to overcome poverty by seeking out people living in the worst conditions of poverty and exclusion. Active in 34 countries, ATD Fourth World brings together people from different cultures and social classes in order to think, act, and live together differently to end poverty. Within the scope of the 59th Commission on Social Development, ATD Fourth World welcomes the Priority Theme “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”.

As recognized in the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2012, the violence of deprivation and contempt associated with extreme poverty isolates individuals and families, locks them into silence to the point where they doubt that they are part of the human community. For those living in extreme poverty, digital transformation could either bring new opportunities to break the vicious cycle of poverty or adversely, could push them further behind if ill-designed.

Today, crucial decisions and guidelines have to be taken in order to ensure that everyone, and especially the most vulnerable, benefit from the digital transformation of our societies and economies. Based on ATD Fourth World’s long experience in acting and thinking together with people in poverty, this contribution aims at not only highlighting concerns about the impact of the digital transformation, but most importantly sharing good practices and recommendations to include the voices and experiences of people living in poverty in digital technology related policies.

A digital era that leaves people behind

A potential for social progress

The current digital transformation taking place worldwide and accelerated during the global pandemic of COVID-19, has the potential to bolster real social progress for humanity, including individuals and communities living in extreme poverty. Increasingly, digital technologies play a key role in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. They can potentially help reduce inequalities by providing digital access to basic services such as health or education. For instance, online learning platforms create opportunities for low-income individuals to access free high-quality education everywhere, anytime, as illustrated by the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Digital technologies can also help governments to better connect to their citizens. For instance, the trend that aims to digitalize the welfare state could improve relations with public services by improving the user experience by reducing the administrative requirements, eliminating the need to travel to an administrative office or by identifying all persons with a right to social protection so they receive the benefits automatically. The right to social security would be strengthened and the issue of the non-take-up of social rights would be resolved. In terms of access to cultural rights, the growing digitalization of culture has provided a window on the world, especially in a lock-down situation such as created by the pandemic. A variety of “*aller vers*” approaches have been implemented, such as virtual access to museums and cultural institutions that made available works of art or representations of live performance. Digital technologies can contribute to opening the walls of cultural places, little visited by those living in poverty because of the high cost. Whether in accessing economic, social and cultural rights, digital technologies could play a major role in realizing humanity’s aspirations towards democratization and equal and free access to resources.

Lost opportunities and threats

Nonetheless, digital technologies have contributed at the same time to the deepening of existing socio-economic inequalities. This gap, commonly called the digital divide, is due to factors such as uneven access to the Internet or uneven capacity to adequately and meaningfully use digital technologies. The digital transformation, often driven by technical progress, is thus reinforcing inequalities. In this multi-speed world, those already left behind by social exclusion are even more excluded in the digital era.

First, some people are excluded by the way the digital world is designed. The fact that digital policies have been determined to a great extent by the private sector has resulted in the marginalization of those without the means to pay for the required services. During the global pandemic lockdown, the failure in providing access to online education to very vulnerable children and families directly violated the right to free, compulsory education for all. According to UNESCO, some 826 million students - kept out of the classroom by the COVID-19 pandemic - do not have access to a household computer or tablet and 43% (706 million) have no internet at home. Moreover, many education programs and classes were designed for children with good digital support and a very good internet connection. For those having to work on smartphones or with weak internet connections, major gaps in education have occurred for children who might already be struggling at school. UNICEF estimates that at least 24 million children are projected to drop out of school due to COVID - a loss that will impact the rest of their lives.

Second, people living in poverty are also excluded because of political choices deliberately using digital technologies to reinforce control and stigmatization, especially in the era of the digital welfare state. Philip Alston, former Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, stated in a 2019 report that while Artificial Intelligence presents opportunities in reaching the furthest behind, it could also be used to exclude people, especially when algorithms are based on data that reinforce negative stereotypes, when individuals are forced to give up their right to privacy and data protection so that the digital welfare state can track their behaviors and punish them, or when individuals are subject to arbitrary decisions made by automated robots without human agency, and with no possibility for appeal. In these situations, the right to social security is highly jeopardized. It is thus essential for the global community to create legal standards and tools allowing for accountability mechanisms and regulations tackling the negative effects of artificial intelligence and digital technologies.

Human rights and participation in the digital transformation

The International Movement ATD Fourth World recognizes a paradox in the digital transformation: the more digital technologies offer new possibilities, the more opportunities it creates for reaching the furthest behind - and yet, at the same time, the more excluded people living in poverty can be. As the world moves towards greater and greater reliance on digital technologies in all areas of life, a people-centred and non-coercive approach is essential to ensuring that they will contribute to improving the well-being of all. Too many development projects have failed to meet the real needs of the most vulnerable, because even though directly affected, they were not included in the decision-making processes. **In order to avoid further failure, the experience and knowledge of people that are experiencing poverty must be taken into account in digital development. They must be associated in the creation, implementation and evaluation of public digital policies.**

An example of participation: ATD Fourth World at the University of Sheffield, UK

In a workshop with the University of Sheffield, UK, ATD Fourth World activists – with a direct experience of poverty – worked with experts to identify the different barriers they face in relation to digital technologies. The workshop focused on Artificial Intelligence in the digital welfare state where several concerns were raised. First, they pointed out that **algorithms based on risk and past negative situations** do not allow policies to build on the hopes and aspirations that help people to overcome the obstacles created by poverty. This stigmatization can be individual but also contextual: computer algorithms based on generalized data reinforce existing negative stereotypes, such as about low-income neighborhoods where heavy policing can produce artificially high crime statistics. The requirement **to use computers to apply for benefits** raises other issues. For the necessary use of computers can create accessibility barriers for people who have not had the opportunity to acquire digital literacy.

The issues raised by ATD Fourth World activists around the digitization of their social welfare benefits echo one of the dimensions of poverty, namely **institutional maltreatment**. In an international participatory research entitled the *Hidden dimensions of poverty*, where people living in poverty were co-researchers alongside academics and practitioners, institutional maltreatment appeared to be the failure of national and international institutions, through their actions or inaction, to respond appropriately and respectfully to the needs and circumstances of people in poverty, and thereby to ignore, humiliate and harm them. Digital technologies policies that are ill-designed are already exacerbating this dimension, resulting in stigmatization and discrimination.

In order to integrate the reality of people living in poverty into the development of digital technologies, ATD Fourth World encourages the creation of spaces at all levels for the participation of people living in poverty in the creation, implementation and evaluation of policies concerning the digital transformation. This participation, when set in the right conditions and meaningfully organized, would allow positive social practices to be taken on board by artificial intelligence specialists.

A human-rights-based approach is essential to encompass the multidimensionality of the digital divide for people living in poverty. Socio-economic inequalities produce digital inequalities that then reinforce the former, creating a vicious circle. Policies must be multidimensional to address poverty and inequalities and not just digital inequalities, which are only the symptoms of pre-existing inequalities. Concretely, the development of digital technologies needs to be based on the human rights criteria of affordability, appropriateness and accessibility to effectively address the problem of poverty and inequality. **A human-rights-based approach in digital transformation means that digital policies aim at facilitating, not preventing, the full and effective access to fundamental rights for all people.**

Recommendations

Based on participatory dialogues with people living in poverty, ATD Fourth World formulated recommendations for enabling a fair development of digital technologies that does not leave people behind:

(a) **A positive and non-coercive approach to digital social policies.** The development of digital technologies must be aligned with the first SDG which aims at “ending poverty in all its forms everywhere” and respects a human right approach. Not creating further stigmatization nor exclusion means that digital technologies have to be designed and used as a force for good.

(b) **Inclusion should be at the heart of the digital transformation. This includes first a right to connection,** with an internet access in all rural areas that are not covered yet, an access to digital support, an affordable connection for everyone, lifelong learning opportunities on digital technologies, adapted websites and interfaces that are easy to use, and a digital identity for all.

(c) When possible, a socially just transition to digital transformation in public services should allow for **the right to a physical human reception**, ensuring that human contact is always present in administrative processes.

(d) To the extent possible, digital policies directly affecting the lives of people living in poverty should be designed, implemented and evaluated with **their meaningful participation**.

(e) **Accountability in the development of digital social policies.** Accountability requires the development of observation and legal tools as well as permanent watchdogs in order to detect human rights violations. **Digital policies must be evaluated in terms of their impact on the poorest 10% of society.**
