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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 Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Edmund Rice International, International Presentation Association, and the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Inc. and Salesian Missions Inc., non-governmental organizations 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 Maryknoll Sisters of St Dominic, Inc., Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Edmund Rice International, International Presentation Association and Salesian Missions, Inc., welcome the theme, Socially Just Transition Towards Sustainable Development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being for all.

It is a very apt topic for this 59th Session of the Commission on Social Development at this moment in history. With great advances in technology, our world is becoming virtually connected at an ever-increasing speed. Technological revolution has become one of the most powerful drivers of sustainable development with possibilities for social inclusion and the wellbeing of all. We have experienced during this pandemic period how technology made almost everything possible. Powerful high-speed internet connections, smaller and smarter hand-held devices such as phones and cameras, and the use of real-time platforms are revolutionizing our communication and redefining relationships.

There is a growing digital divide due to unequal access to the internet and accessibility to technological devices. Notably, there is the culture of bias and dominance based on patriarchy, together with gendered socialization processes, influencing the digital age that discourages women and girls from developing and engaging in technological advancement. Digital access must be universal. World Bank data shows that South Asia tops the lead in gender digital divide at 51 percent, down from 67 percent in 2017, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa, at 37 percent. While Internet connectivity has been positive and innovative in so many areas, we cannot be blind to the fact that it has also created new forms of crimes, abuse, surveillance and social conflict and these must be addressed. Internet security and protection of personal and collective/national sensitive information are becoming increasingly open to hacking and malicious theft which jeopardizes peoples' wellbeing and national security.

Urgent critical attention must be given to addressing the dark side to these technologies where cyber criminals use them to exploit children over the internet. According to the International Justice Mission (IJM) report, there is an increase of Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) during the COVID-19 lockdown. These findings are based on reports from the Philippines anti-trafficking law enforcement operations between March and May 2020, stating that OSEC is a crime of opportunity. COVID-19 lockdowns created a perfect storm for the increase in online sexual abuse of children. Quarantined online child sex offenders are spending more time online and vulnerable children confined at home are easy prey and, in some cases, even live with their traffickers. Additionally, extreme poverty often drives adult guardians to lure and victimize children to participate in cybercrimes.

The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) says that the threat of online sexual exploitation and abuse is growing at an alarming rate. It has become very easy for online predators to make contact with children, grooming them for exploitation, exhorting them for explicit content, and even attempting to meet them in person. Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) is fundamentally a crime of power and it is increasingly driven by economic motives and facilitated by technology. Transnational corporations control digital technology. The trends towards normalization of violent narrative and sexual imagery promote misogyny and exploitation of girls, women and children. It exploits a demand-driven supply chain where those who have - mostly male - take advantage of those who do not have - mostly female including children.

Globally, various social media platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp are being used by young people at high rates. According to a United Nations report, 1 in 3 internet users worldwide is a child and 800 million of them use social media. Any child can become a victim of online violence (E/CN.3/2016/2/Rev.1). It is reported that Facebook tops the list of reported cases of *child sexual abuse material* (CSAM) but the company is not doing enough to stop the problem. According to data, in 2019, more than 16.9 million reports of CSAM online and of that about 94 percent came from the Facebook platform according to a report published by Proxy Impact. Likewise, reports of child online sexual abuse to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Child (NCMEC) has grown from 1 million in 2014 to 45 million in 2018. In a 2018 study produced by ECPAT International and Interpol on child sexual abuse online, identified victims' gender were 64.5 percent girls and 31.1 percent boys. Sixty percent of the victims are in the pre-pubescent age and about 84.2 percent of the videos and images contained severe abuse. Identified offenders of CSAM were 92.7 percent male.

Global internet governance must establish rules, policies, standards and practices that coordinate and shape global cyberspace for the common good and wellbeing and of all, especially protection of children. Governments have failed in regulating the technology industry. Concern was expressed by Philip Alston in his report as Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (2019) when he noted that the technology sector remains virtually a human rights-free zone.

Sustainable Development Goal No. 16 calls for strong institutions. This goal reiterates that the rule of law and development have a significant relationship with each other and both are intersectional across all goals with implications at the national and international level. SDG 16.2 calls to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children. Sustainable Development Goal No. 1 calls for an end to extreme poverty urging implementation of social protection floors. During this time of COVID 19 with more and more families being pushed into extreme poverty, the full implementation of SDG 1 is imperative and foundational.

While we applaud the good practices that are already being implemented by Member States, Information Technology companies, private sectors, faith-based organizations and civil society groups and other stakeholders to protect children from online sexual exploitation there is much room for vigilant and critical improvements to these policies. One such good practice can be reviewed at the International Telecommunication Union with its Guidelines on Child Online Protection (COP) responding to new challenges and significant shifts in the digital landscape. They have also published a series of books for children with regard to internet safety. However, we challenge the lack of coherent and global efforts to address OSEC. In addition, we take note that information technology is significantly advancing in quantum leap and bounds in its design and functions. Therefore, it is important to keep up with regulations to monitor, review and evaluate implementations of these laws that address the issue of OSEC.

We call on Members States to:

1.   Mainstream internet child protection laws in national and sub-national policies that address online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) in all levels of government, public, and private sectors.

2.   Strengthen specialized anti-trafficking law enforcement and court prosecution by Increasing their budget and personnel and by supporting child-protective prosecutions to avoid re-traumatization.

3.   Increase collaboration with international law enforcement agencies working on anti-trafficking and on cases of online sexual exploitation of children.

4. Ensure that holistic and trauma-informed recovery services, including physical and mental well-being are provided for child victims.

5. Provide capacity-building and education in a school-based setting that empowers children and adult guardians to fight against OSEC.

6. Prosecute enablers and perpetrators of online sexual exploitation of children both in source and demand-side countries.

7. That state agencies and governments pass legislation to require Electronic and Internet Service Providers to install filters and blocking software using artificial intelligence to block, filter and intercept child sexual exploitation materials and live streaming of child sexual abuse, along with detection measures (including cross-industry data sharing) to identify offenders. The international community must have power to monitor and support implementation.

8. That United Nations establish a global internet governance and institution that will create a global ethical internet policy, regulate and implement global internet agreements and ensure unified data collection to issues such as online sexual exploitation of children.

This statement is endorsed by:

Casa Generalizia della Societa del Sacro Cuore

Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul

Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd

Dominican Leadership Conference

Edmund Rice International

Fondazione Proclade Internazionale-onlus

Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate

International Presentation Association

Loretto Community (Sisters of Loretto)

Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers

Neighbourhood Community Network

Passionists International

Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary

Salesian Missions, Inc.

Sisters of Charity Federation

The Grail

UNANIMA International

VIVAT International

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