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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 Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate and VIVAT International, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

VIVAT International, a collaborative network of 12 faith-based organizations and Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate work in over 120 countries for the promotion of sustainable development and human rights at international and local levels. In a time when human mobility is curtailed due to COVID-19, the deliberations on the priority theme “Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all” is an apt one.

As the United Nations (UN) celebrates 75 years of existence, we know how much our world has changed regarding communications. Since 1945, the above-mentioned and television, and much later computers, the internet, cell phones, tablets, iPad, have become common gadgets of communications. 75 years ago, many people in our world counted on newspapers, magazines, and radio for their information. Today, amidst the pandemic related restrictions, the digital technology revolution has enabled virtual spaces for multilateral deliberations and dialogues. It is accessible to all who can avail of the internet. Such digital technologies and those still to develop call the international community to address the policy issues. Deliberations on developing concrete strategies for tapping the opportunities, dealing with challenges, and minimizing threats could serve as a key to socially just transitions for sustainable development. This revolution must necessarily find ways and means to ensure access to every aspect for all, especially to the poorest and furthest removed from the big population centers in our world. To this end, addressing disparities that already exist within our communities through the lens of cross-cutting factors such as class, ethnicity, race, gender, and disabilities, and other forms of vulnerabilities is vital.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has caused colossal damage to the wellbeing of people, especially those in the margins. Though some refer to COVID-19 as an equalizer, it is not. Its impacts on those living in poverty and experiencing discriminatory situations are worse. Thousands across the world have lost jobs and livelihood pushing them to precarious situations. Small business owners also suffered great losses.

Digital technology is much spoken about due to its wide use during the COVID-19 outbreak. Governments, workplaces, and educational institutions are increasingly using virtual platforms. While it has been somewhat easier for professionals to adopt working from home, thousands in unorganized and care work have lost their jobs as they do not have access to digital technologies. During the pandemic, e-learning is seen as an alternative way to transform the education sector amidst various challenges of digital divide. While digital methods seem to be feasible in urban settings, that is often not so in interior villages. There are positive efforts to use the internet in many countries. However, there are many hurdles in making education entirely digital. The rural population is not fully equipped for e-learning; there is a lack of familiarity with digital technology and a lack of financial capacity to acquire technical devices. The problem of a power supply is an added challenge.

Just transitions are only possible when concerted efforts are made to reduce inequalities on the ground. Hunched over a rickety table in his family’s three-room shanty, Missael Soayne wrote diligently on a sheet of graph paper. It was a morning, time for reading comprehension. His father, out of work, had warned him not to waste paper, so the baby-faced 14-year-old carefully drew small, tight letters on the page. Peru, the nation with the world’s highest coronavirus mortality rate, is also one of the dozens of countries where schools nationwide remain closed on account of the pandemic, with no reopening date in sight. Some families can afford workarounds. Students wealthy enough can afford to pay for private schools have kept their

education going with private tutors and interactive classes on home computers. Public schoolchildren with the Internet at home can access extended lessons online. Missael has none of that.

Our members working with the local communities in Indonesia highlight digital technology and the challenges they face. In urban areas, e-learning is smoother. It is a financial burden on parents to buy smartphones or tablets for their children. Due to poor internet connectivity, they cannot fully understand the lessons taught. In some villages in Eastern Indonesia, people climb trees to get a good signal when they want to make or receive calls. There is no equal distribution of internet access, especially in the remote villages. Gajamada University in Indonesia recently surveyed 1.305 respondents consisting of students, teachers, and parents. The study shows that more than 50% of students from junior and senior high schools in five regencies of the Jogjakarta Province get trouble with the internet network. (<https://www.kompas.com/edu>).

From the Andes to Africa to the United States, this is what falling through the cracks looks like: A pandemic generation of poor children shut out of schools and learning. Already disadvantaged by poverty and inequity, they are now in danger of falling further behind. Globally, roughly a third of the world's schoolchildren, or nearly 600 million, remain affected by pandemic-related school closures, according to UNICEF. Some 463 million schoolchildren worldwide, UNICEF estimates, lacking Internet, television, or radio, have been left with almost no access to education (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/10/16/coronavirus-peru-remote-learning-inequality/>).

Some of our members have shared about Community radio program to build awareness on various issues. The Community Radio managers were trained who in turn held informative programmes on Health Protocols, local wisdom, and Government Policies related to COVID-19. The broadcast content production is made in the form of Audio and Video which are then disseminated through Community Radio broadcasts or YouTube presentations. One of the capacity-building activities was producing Community Radio Broadcasts for women and children during the Pandemic, done in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection. Community Radio is a simpler technology which is easily accessible and affordable. It has the ability for extending information to poor rural communities and could serve as a viable medium for socially just transition.

In this time, we are prepared to put our efforts into supporting the UN to encourage Member States to seriously strive for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) everywhere and for everyone, especially those living in extreme poverty. The UN can propose, motivate, and even insist on the importance of assuring digital technologies as they exist and as they develop so that education, health care, food security, adequate housing and all basic needs and capacities can be greatly enhanced.

Every person left out, left behind is a person diminished in the development of capacities and in the ability to participate actively and productively for her/his own good, the good of the family, community and the common good. To this end, all of society approach must be adopted whereby the millions currently left behind are able to participate in inventing, developing, bringing knowledge and art to a new, better world, to build back better. It is our hope that every Member State, the United Nations, and indeed each one of us can in the very near future be judged positively by those who are now being left behind and can surge towards a better future.

Cyber security is one of the risks of digital technology. Today numerous data is circulated online relating to all areas of life, governance, and economy. Development of digital technology and safeguarding the peoples' right to privacy, dignity and

security must be done alongside with stricter laws and mechanisms to implement them. Member States must consider policies that would mandate national level legislations to that effect to curb cyber-crimes by state and non-state actors.

We acknowledge the critical role of digital technology in promoting social development especially in efforts to build back better the states' economic recovery and advance the micro, small and medium business of communities at this time of pandemic and beyond.

We, therefore, strongly recommend to the Member States to:

1. Build digital technology infrastructures that Develop and Provide equal access to internet for all, including those living in remote rural areas.
2. Guarantee transfer of knowledge about digital technology so that people and local communities have an adequate understanding of the digital technology literacy.
3. Promote readily available technologies such as radio to all as a mode of just transition
4. Allocate human and financial resources for enhancing educational infrastructure.
5. Consult and collaborate with civil society and faith-based organizations
6. Enact cyber laws to address hacking, data breach and other cyber-attacks.
