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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 Sisters of Charity Federation, Company
of the Daughters of Charity, Congregation of the Mission,
International Association of Charities (AIC) and International
Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul,
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

We are Faith-based organizations belonging to the Vincentian Family with over two million members, engaged in 155 countries to eradicate poverty, hunger and homelessness. We employ the tools of systemic change to implement sustainable development to transform the lives of marginalized people. The digital divide is an everyday reality for the people with whom we partner.

As billions of people try to grapple with the unprecedented crises presented by COVID-19 pandemic, the concept, “socially just transition” can provide a vision and framework of principles, processes and practices to guide the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all, and create a compassionate, fairer and interconnected world. The promise of social, political and financial inclusion can become a reality only when digital technologies are accessible to those left behind.

COVID-19 lockdowns have accelerated the use of technology to work remotely, access healthcare, education, banking, shopping, public information and social interaction. While digital technologies have the capacity to help advance social progress and overcome inequalities, the pandemic is shining light on the growing ‘digital divide.’

COVID-19 is reversing the decade’s long fight against poverty, hunger and inequalities. COVID-19 is not a leveler, but a revealer, it has magnified the existing inequalities in all its dimensions – income, wealth, access to food, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, adequate housing, electricity, information and communication technology, social protection, etc. While 70–100 million people fell into extreme poverty and 265 million people went hungry every day, the wealth of billionaires increased by 27 per cent.

The irony of the digital divide is highlighted by the fact that 93% of the world population live within physical proximity of mobile broadband/internet service. But only 53.6 % of the people use the internet – leaving 3.6 billion people with no access. In low income countries, only 19% have access.

The world of work: As digital technology improves production and human welfare, automation, artificial intelligence and robotics are replacing workers. Only the highly educated, professionals are able to hold on to their jobs. During the pandemic, 400 million people lost their jobs in the formal sector. Millions employed in the informal economy lost their jobs especially in low- and middle-income countries. According to the International Labor Organization, in India alone, 400 million workers in this vulnerable sector are facing impoverishment. At the same time, the Information and Communication Technology sector is facing a shortage of workers. Socially just transition is the key to restore employment and dignity to people.

The world of Education: COVID-19 forced 1.52 billion children out of schools, disrupting their education. Of these, 463 million children, especially those in Sub-Saharan Africa are unable to access remote learning for lack of electricity, technology, radio, television and internet. They are joining a lost generation, without education. Poverty and hunger are forcing many to join the workforce to support families; while others become victims of forced labor or trafficking. Many girls, denied their right to education, have become child brides. SDG 4, “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong opportunities for all,” can assist in socially just transitions, if empowered with digital technologies.

World of women and girls – digital gender divide: Traditionally women and girls are left behind by the impacts of poverty and discrimination. Women are bearing

the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic – 40 % (510 million) employed in the service sector lost their employment and livelihoods. Globally, 740 million women are engaged in low paid informal sector. 80% of domestic workers are women and 72% of them lost their jobs. While digitalization of the economy is accelerating, lack of digital skills, access and internet are excluding women from the workplace. Their participation in design and production of digital technologies and decision-making roles are also impeded. Digital inclusion is not possible without digital literacy and access. China and Indonesia have shown that women with digital skills, access to technologies and financial inclusion have the power to reduce gender inequality through internet businesses. Digital and financial inclusions are necessary to advance the benefits of social inclusion for women.

Homelessness: Globally 150 million people are homeless and their numbers are increasing as millions of unemployed become vulnerable to evictions. Digital technologies can be used to provide early interventions and resources to people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless. Mobile access has proven to be a great tool in the San Francisco area for connecting with family, friends and case workers; improving health outcomes; gaining employment and accessing social services; and offering a greater sense of empowerment and agency. Some cities and regions have created digital hubs to connect homeless with all available services and resources.

A socially just transition requires the implementation of SDG 16 – to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for all, where people have equal access to justice through accountable and transparent institutions. To ensure equal opportunities, access to information, basic services and protection of fundamental freedoms, local, state and national governments should adopt digital platforms for governance.

Civil society partners with governments everywhere to realize the foundational goals of the United Nations and implement sustainable development goals. Rapidly shrinking civic space is impacting them in many countries and at the United Nations. Through digital authoritarianism and surveillance on internet and social media, governments are curtailing human/civil/ political rights, and preventing them from playing their role in advocacy.

Post COVID-19 development jargon is: ‘build back better, smarter and greener.’ ‘Building back’ implies the need to revert to unsustainable foundational frameworks. The current crisis provides the opportunity to examine existing socio-economic and development policy frameworks as it embarks on ‘socially just transition’. Focus should be on ‘building forward,’ to create an interconnected and interdependent world, employing the inclusive and transformative capabilities of digital technologies. Transition should be a process/movement for rebuilding by all stakeholders; a whole of government and a whole of society approach, to uphold the human rights of all. The 2030 Agenda is the roadmap to ‘build forward,’ for inclusion, and end the digital divide and inequalities.

Recommendations: A Socially just transition should ensure that there is no further increase in social inequalities.

1. Make digital technology at the service of all people, by implementing #114 of Addis Ababa Action Agenda to bridge the ‘digital divide’ between countries through transfer of technology on mutually agreed terms to “promote the development and use of information and communications technology infrastructure, as well as capacity building for least developed countries...access to technology and science for women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.”

2. Invest in infrastructure development to ensure access to electricity, telecommunication services and high-speed data affordable.
3. Invest in human and institutional capacities for digital literacy, online learning/ work and access to online banking, mobile money transfer and telemedicine.
4. Provide internet access to all schools for inclusive, quality education to all children.
5. Create ethical standards, frameworks and policies to eliminate inherent gender biases in the development of digital technologies to support women's inclusion in the production, design and governance of digital technologies.
6. Create platforms to monitor and eliminate cyber bullying, child pornography, trafficking in persons and modern-day slavery.
7. Create data platforms to collect disaggregated data for policy making and services for gender equality, empowerment of women and girls and homeless people.
8. Support rural women farmers with information on weather, disasters, crops, market prices to assist production and sales.
9. Create digital hubs at local/regional/na level for data on homelessness and provide services and resources to homeless.
10. Invest in digitalization of economy to create new job opportunities.
11. Invest in re-skilling/upskilling of workers for decent jobs/re-employment to reduce poverty and inequalities.
12. Involve people who are affected and left behind to draw on their experiences and knowledge to develop policies and plans on digital inclusion.
13. Create a transparent digital policy framework to accord digital rights and inclusion for civil society participation in policy making and sustainable development.
14. Create a global governance architecture for a balance between digitalization and social inclusion, promotion of digital public goods in collaboration all stakeholders.
