

Written Statement – Maria Fornella-Oehninger and Monica Jahangir-Chowdhury, co-chairs of the NGO Committee on Social Development

Good Morning! Excellencies, esteemed colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Maria Fornella-Oehninger and I am co-chair of the NGO Committee on Social Development.

And my name is Monica Jahangir-Chowdhury, the other co-chair of the Committee. On behalf of the Committee, we thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Digital technology has shrunk the planet, galvanized voices for social change and transformed the way we live forever. This pandemic has revealed in real time that digital transformation can bring impressive benefits for social progress but can also result in deepening already existing inequalities, more discrimination, loss of basic rights and social protection. Spread of misinformation, breach of privacy and impact of social media on mental health and wellbeing are also major concerns that demand our attention. We bring to you a message of hope but at the same time, a message of urgency.

Inspired by the Priority Theme of the Commission, our NGO Committee worked relentlessly to enable and enhance the participation of grassroots and civil society organizations through various mediums. For the first time ever, our Civil Society Declaration has been opened for public endorsement and was signed by over 480 civil society organizations and individuals to this day. The 10 recommendations from this Declaration will be presented shortly.

People all over the world want to be seen and heard as we collectively seek a just transition: more than 70 videos representing grassroots voices and experiences from all continents and all walks of life were sent to us, a clear and direct illustration that the foundational concept of We the Peoples in the UN Charter is still alive today more than ever, and that everyone's voices matter, from the Indian teenager using mobile banking to the grandparent in Europe using social media to stay in touch with family during the pandemic, the alert citizen worried about the spread of 'fake news' on social media, or the teacher in rural Zambia worried about this students not being able to connect to internet or the Indigenous communities that are even more excluded, disconnected and disempowered.

These are powerful examples of the extent to which, internet access and content are transforming the lives of individuals and communities, shaping their future, affecting their wellbeing and at times their mere survival.

All around the world, a large part of the global population lacks basic access to fundamental rights such as education, healthcare, housing. In times of global pandemic, these deprivations are cumulative and compounded by the lack of access to the internet or electronic devices.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- Internet connection must be established as a fundamental right for all.
- Governments must prioritize digital literacy training and provide digital access to social protection services, based on a human- rights approach that prevents abuses, dehumanization and stigmatization based on technological design bias.

Poverty reduction has slowed down in the last five years, inequalities are on the rise and critical investments to achieve a just transition to sustainable development remain underfunded. We need to bring back the notion that citizens, as owners of pensions and savings, are at the center of the economy.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Financing for Development process must be strengthened by stemming illicit financial flows, restructuring sovereign debt, and taking other related actions for a more equitable distribution of resources.
- Science and technology must be at the heart of North/South cooperation and it must include Technology transfer and investment in infrastructure capabilities.

Global digital technology must be guided by effective and responsive digital governance formulated from public input, active participation from the grassroots and accountability of all those involved.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- To improve digital inclusion, internet, data and Artificial Intelligence must be considered as Digital Public Goods. Protections are particularly needed with regard to digital identity, privacy, online harassment, online content and data.
- All regulatory frameworks must be adapted to the new realities so that digital technologies can lead the world into a Socially Just Transition to Sustainable Development

To conclude, we the representatives of civil society, put our trust in you, the member states, the industry and UN system as a whole, to harness the transformational power of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to build better societies guided by the values of justice, equity, security, and transparency.

Let us join forces and harness the immense potential of digital technology for the benefit of all, accelerating the global transition to a sustainable development based on inclusion, respect for human rights and human dignity. Merci. Muchas gracias. Thank you.