

Serving Across the Digital Divide:

Catholic Religious Witness to the Role of Digital Technology in Social Inequalities

Side event to the 59th UN Commission on Social Development

15 February 2021

13:15-14:30 EST (UTC -5:00)

The oft-referenced tagline of the Sustainable Development Goals “leave no one behind” is of special relevance to the Commission on Social Development whose mandate focuses on reduction of social inequalities along many lines in the landscape of human diversity. As members of the Justice Coalition of Religious, which unites the voices of many United Nations-accredited organisations representing Catholic Sisters, Brothers, and priests, we are particularly concerned with the latter, less frequently cited part of the tagline: Reach the furthest behind first. Our faith-based commitment to a preferential option for the poor, a core principle of Catholic Social Teaching, requires us to attune our ears and to direct the work of our hands in response to the cries of the most vulnerable among us and to the natural environment. We have thus been working alongside “the furthest behind” toward sustainable development for centuries.

From this vantage point, we have witnessed COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns widening pre-existing socio-economic inequalities to a veritable chasm. We have seen the exacerbation of old inequalities and the emergence of new ones faced by those on the disconnected side of each nation’s digital divide. In the midst of public health crisis, education, employment, and participation in public life have all become less accessible to them than ever.

In this side event on the margins of the 59th UN Commission for Social Development, we will learn from the experiences, perspectives, and visions of several Catholic women and men Religious who are dedicated to service of those on the disconnected side of our current digital divide. They will shine a light on the particular ways the digital divide has impacted the marginalised communities in which they live and minister. They will also offer their insights into what the first steps toward digitalization could look like in their communities and the role they are ready to play in that process.

Possible speakers (to be confirmed):

- Representative of Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary from one of their schools in Zambia (school for girls in underserved areas of Southern Province, school for children with mental and physical disabilities in Choma, or school for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Lusaka)
- Representative of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur’s Photovoltaic Project, which has been providing clean energy, clean water, and internet access for tens of thousands of people, including the Sisters, students, and patients in hospitals and clinics in nine remote communities in Nigeria and seven in the Democratic Republic of Congo

- Sister Patrice M. Colletti, SDS, who volunteers with Virtual Ability, Inc. (VAI), which addresses disability inequality through a variety of virtual services (disability-related information and support) provided in a virtual world to members from all over the physical world. Sr. Patrice is also directly involved in tribal education on the Lake Traverse Reservation (Oceti Sakowin Nation), where she offers culturally appropriate, original-language based education available to nearly 750 children of the tribe. Addressing educational inequality has become particularly evident during COVID 19 as more than 50% of her students' households did not have internet access, making online education during isolation impossible until the tribe was able to secure federal funding to help with the costs of getting internet access and a laptop computer into the home of each school family.
- Sr. Glória Inêz Caixeta, MSC, who works in a community of 36,000 families of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda where she would like to offer a technology center that would allow community members to access the internet
- Sr. Jane Eschweiler, SDS, in Arizona, USA or another woman or man Religious who would like to offer chaplaincy and counselling services by video conference to those being held in prisons or in immigration detention centers