



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 (see below for full list of member NGOs), 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.

Speakers:

- **Sister Lorraine Connell, SNDdeN**, founder of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur’s African 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 Coltridah Mooya, RSHM**, Head Teacher at the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary's St. Mulumba School for children with mental and physical disabilities in Choma, Zambia
- **Naydesign Joan Talasan, aMMS**, Representative of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur's Photovoltaic Project, Teacher at two Indigenous People's schools run by the Medical Mission Sisters and Secretary of the Indigenous Apostolate for the Malaybalay Diocese in the Philippines
- **Sister Elena Saavedra Pardo, FMA**, PDO Coordinator for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and Salesians of Don Bosco's Father José Vicente Rivadeneira Bilingual Intercultural Community Education Unit in Ecuador
- Video presentation from the Society of the Sacred Heart's Saint Madeleine Sophie Foundation featuring: **Sister Bethanie Sulleza, rscj**, SMSF President; **Lizette Santillan-Paas**, SMSF OIC Executive Director; and **Sister Joy Luz, rscj**, Coordinator of the Society's JPIC Learning Hub

Event sponsor: Justice Coalition of Religious (JCoR)

UN ECOSOC-accredited member NGOs of JCoR:

- Casa Generalizia della Societa del Sacro Cuore
- Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul
- Congregation of the Mission
- Congregations of St. Joseph
- Dominican Leadership Conference
- Fondazione Proclade Internazionale-Onlus
- Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Loreto Generalate
- International Presentation Association
- Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers
- Passionists International
- Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary
- Salesian Missions, Inc.
- School Sisters of Notre Dame
- Sisters of Charity Federation
- Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur
- Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries
- UNANIMA International

UN DGC-affiliated member NGOs of JCoR:

- Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal
- Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate