



59TH SESSION OF THE UN COMMISSION ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
8 – 17 FEVRIER 2021

**Socially just transition towards sustainable development:
the role of digital technologies on social development
and well-being of all**

Concept Note for a Side-Event

Harnessing digital technologies for maternal health and parenting - A real bonus for family wellbeing?

12 February 2021 – 10:00 am New York / 16:00 pm Paris
Side-Event to be held virtually during CSocD59

The proposed virtual side-event relates to the commission's priority theme: 'Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all'. It focuses on the particular impact of digital technologies on the wellbeing of mothers and their children.

Background

Digital technology has already transformed societies and economies in many parts of the world, opening new ways to communicate, changing lifestyles and creating new types of employment. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), in particular mobile technology, can notably benefit and improve the quality of life of families in remote areas, through access to health, education and financial services, fostering more inclusiveness.

Mobile health (mHealth) applications are proving particularly promising for health promotion and education, as well as remote access to health services, thereby contributing to the realization of several SDG targets, notably target 3.1 (on Maternal mortality) and target 4.2 (Early Childhood Education & Care).

Some examples:

- The mobile app **JamboMama**¹, which is being tested in Tanzania, aims to connect women (and their communities) with qualified maternal healthcare workers (and the health care system in which they work). The objective, again, is to prevent complications during pregnancy and birth and saves the lives of mothers and babies.
- In the UK, '**BabyBuddy**'² is a mobile app to support early child development – a key factor for a child's future success in life. It provides timely information and advice to parents during pregnancy and the

¹ <https://smartaccesstohealthforall.org/jambomama-2/>

² <https://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/baby-buddy>

first 6 months of their child's life, thereby helping mothers/parents "look after their baby's mental and physical health, as well as their own, and give their baby the best start in life".

- More recently in the context of Covid-19, mothers2mothers, an MMM associate member based in South Africa, has created the '**Virtual Mentor Mother Platform**'³ for the sub-Saharan African region (Angola, Kenya, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda). Utilizing WhatsApp, the platform enables the dissemination of WHO's prevention messages and other relevant information that are translated into more than 30 languages, thereby reaching a wide audience.

Unfortunately, the many potential benefits of digital technology remain elusive, especially for marginalized populations. Digital technology also creates new inequalities or exacerbates existing ones. Digital divides are multiple and intersect to reinforce each other: for many mothers, the gender digital divide is compounded by the urban/rural divide, social norms and gender stereotypes, disparities in income, education and digital literacy, as well as access to pre-existing infrastructures, beginning with electricity (850 million people remain without this basic service).

Even if they can access the Internet, mothers face specific challenges made even more acute and visible because of the Covid-19 crisis and its subsequent lockdowns:

- **Remote schooling:** mothers are usually the ones "in-charge" in families – much more than fathers, and this responsibility collides with their own work obligations. Many also lack digital literacy to support their children in accessing online courses. And of course, many families must face the simple fact that the lack of adequate computer or internet access makes remote learning an illusion for their child who risks being left behind.
- **Teleworking:** for those who are able or obliged to telework, childcare obligations might make it impossible for mothers to attain a reasonable work-life balance. The right to disconnect has also become an issue, and many mothers, much more than men or women without children, have lost their jobs during the pandemic.
- **Managing children's screen time, protecting them and controlling internet content:** many parents feel powerless when it comes to setting the right balance in ICT use for their children, finding suitable content, and preventing online violence or access to inappropriate content.

In families with children, mothers, much more than fathers, have seen the time they devote to childcare increase during the lockdowns. They have been struggling to balance telework and support for online schooling, with major impacts on their health and their ability to keep their job. It is time that these challenges be recognized and addressed, by both governments and the private sector.

Objectives of the Side-Event

The objectives of this side-event, which will take the form of a panel, are:

1. To showcase initiatives and good practices of digital technologies use for the benefit of mothers and their children, with a particular focus on the huge potential of maternal and child mobile health, notably in developing countries; and to identify the main obstacles for scaling up.

³ <https://m2m.org/2020/08/06/tech-for-good/>

2. To put a spotlight on the challenges that connected parents, face in relation to the invasion of digital technologies in their everyday life – which have been magnified by the covid-19 crisis and disproportionately impacted mothers’ health and economic situation, and to draw some recommendations to governments and other stakeholders to address these challenges.

Ultimately, the objective is to call on governments and other stakeholders to take action: the Covid-19 crisis and its subsequent lockdowns have shown the critical importance of digital technologies, especially for families, but also the many issues that remain to make it work for everyone – leave no one offline. It also provides an opportunity to learn, especially from the lockdown experience, to build a digital infrastructure that bridges the multiple digital gaps, and to develop remote services which are well regulated and respond to the actual needs of every stakeholder – beginning with families. The report of the side-event will summarise the event’s key messages and recommendations, and will feed further advocacy on the topic.

Modality and provisional list of speakers

There will be a short introduction from the moderator and an opening video to set the scene. The event will then be structured in 2 parts, with 2 or 3 speakers being considered for each part to make short presentations. The (virtual) floor will then be open to questions and input from participants as starting points for further discussions.

Moderator: Anne-Claire de Liedekerke - President, Make Mothers Matter (TBC)

Opening video: montage featuring testimonials from grassroots NGOs from the MMM network highlighting lasting impacts of the Covid-19 crisis and how they have creatively used digital technology to support mother and families (with CeprodiH in Uruguay, L’Heure Joyeuse in Morocco, Mame Pentru Mame in Romania amongst others)

Panellists:

Part I - Practical examples of mobile technologies to improve mother and child health

- Laetitia van Haren, Founder and director of the Smart Access to Health For All (SAHFA - France), on its mobile App JamboMama!, which aims at reducing maternal mortality and morbidity in Africa
- Felicity Jones, Head of Development, mothers2mothers (m2m – South Africa) on the “Virtual Mentor Mother Platform”, a WhatsApp platform, which enables the dissemination of WHO’s prevention messages and other relevant information around Covid-19 in more than 30 languages of sub-Saharan Africa (TBC)
- Alison Baum, Founder and CEO, Best beginning (UK), on ‘BabyBuddy’, a mobile App for parents that supports Early Childhood Development

Part II - Challenges faced by mothers / parents in relation to the use of digital technology

- Dr. Michael Rich, Founder and Director, Center of Media and Child Health, Harvard University on the impact of digital technology on children and how parents can be guided
- Speaker TBC on the challenges of remote learning and strategies to help children and families to address them

- Short video or speaker TBC on issues related to telework and its particular impact on mothers

This event will be organized by Make Mothers Matter. Partnerships are foreseen with academic and civil society organisations, which will be invited as speakers.

About Make Mother Matter - MMM

Make Mothers Matter (MMM) is an international NGO created in 1947 to raise the awareness of policy makers and public opinion on the contribution of mothers to social, cultural and economic development. MMM has no political or religious affiliations, and thus transparently voices the concerns of mothers at international level with permanent MMM representatives at the United Nations (General Consultative Status), UNESCO and the European Union. MMM federates a network with more than 40 organizations, most of them participate actively to help mothers and families in Covid-19 crisis, some of them used digital technologies to improve their actions. Further, MMM participate to the creation of a global solidarity network with other international organizations and the UNESCO to share effective initiatives to tackle the consequences of Covid-19.

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