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**Statement by GERARD QUINN,**

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**on THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

Fifty-ninth session of the Commission for Social Development

Interactive dialogue with senior officials of the UN systems on the priority theme (“Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all”)

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Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates and participants,

Thank you.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to address you today.

I am very conscious of the fact that the first Special Rapporteur on disability (the honorable Bengt Lindquist) was answerable directly to you at the Commission for Social Development, and that the previous Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, my predecessor Catalina Devandas, participated in your sessions.

I am therefore very happy that my mandate allows me to maintain the close relationship with the Commission.

The adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals underscores the need for sustainable economic and social development to underpin human rights. I am on record as saying that the SDGs help to ratchet human rights forward, give them fresh impetus and deal with the ecosystem that gives meaning and direction to rights. Human rights and sustainable development is a two-way street.

We are at a unique moment in history.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the accumulated disadvantages faced by many. We have made great strides in altering the official policy and culture on disability and indeed on age. We have largely changed law and policy. What we forgot is that the old ways of thinking remain embedded in how systems respond, and this was especially so during the pandemic.

We know we need to build a much more resilient and inclusive future. As we start to build back we are at a key inflection point in the history of humanity with the beginning of a new technological revolution – a revolution that makes systemic change possible for the first time in a long time.

While the underlying trends are almost inevitable, they do need to be properly harnessed, lest older persons and persons with disabilities are further disadvantaged.

The social state is changing. The traditional way of delivering services through large intermediaries has reached its limit. We have long dreamt of personalized services restoring voice and power to the person. And we have long dreamt of giving the consumer power to do so, through individualized budgets.

Things are now trending in that direction. The onset of electronic platforms in particular, to bridge supply (an expanded range of supply) and demand, will revolutionize the scene in the next decade or so.

Sustainability in this context has to mean maintaining standards whilst making space for innovation. It has to mean to avoid creating “large intermediaries”- like large online platforms which could undermine the role of the state, (effectively privatizing social support). It has to mean the rigorous enforcement of competition law to forestall new platforms gaining too much control and power over the supply of support. And it has to mean ensuring that the ‘social profit’ motive remains the strongest.

Sustainability also means being careful not to generate any more precarious employment and being attentive to the situation of informal carers of persons with disabilities and older persons – sure one of the most neglected groups in the world and that are mostly comprised of women and girls.

Regarding the advent of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, it seems as if the terms of human co-existence are being re-written. We are becoming the sum total of what we consume electronically. This is, in turn, reflected back in how systems respond and adjust to individual situations – and indeed anticipate them (without us even noticing). Those who consume less or who consume differently will be – treated differently. This includes both persons with disabilities and older persons.

It seems, encoded in machine learning are traditional ways of framing both age and disability. Machines, it seems, are just as capable of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ as humans – the assumption that whatever ‘is’ is what ‘ought to be.’ It seems machine learning is just in need of being purged of ableism and ageism as are humans.

Sustainability in this context will mean resisting the crude determinism implicit in Artificial Intelligence, which reduces humanity to the measurable expression of the self and which forgets the inner life of the self. And sustainability will mean weaning machine learning away from ableist or ageist assumptions and making express allowance for the diversity of humanity which is one of its richest treasures.

Finally, I would like to remind all of us that - together with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the 2019 United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS) will support efforts to ensure that the UN is more accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities.

May I point particularly to the novel provisions in UNDIS on the need to adjust UN procurement policy. Purchasing social justice through procurement by setting minimum IT accessibility standards has been shown to work elsewhere in the world. I look forward to the maximum use of this tool in the UN system.

Older persons and persons with disabilities have been among the furthest left behind. New technology opens up new vistas for change. But we need to ensure it does not carry forward old mindsets like ableism and ageism and leave us even further behind.

I thank you.

[ENDS]