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ICT, Social Capital and Cultural Diversity

Report on a Joint IPTS-DG INFSO Workshop
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(Executive Summary)

Authors: Romina Cachia, Stefano Kluzer,
Marcelino Cabrera, Clara Centeno and Yves Punie

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This report presents the key results of an expert workshop jointly organized by the Information Society Unit at IPTS[1] and DG Information Society and Media. The objective of the workshop was to analyse the potential of ICT and social capital for the social and economic integration and participation of Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities (IEM). Based on this analysis, policy recommendations are identified to support digital inclusion, which was made a priority in the Riga Ministerial Declaration, and to contribute to the preparation of the 2007 eInclusion Communication. This report presents the results of the workshop and additional desk research.

…IEM is not an homogeneous group

Understanding the complex and diverse population of IEM is crucial for the success of fostering a culturally diverse Europe. IEM cannot be treated as an homogeneous group, as their needs and conditions vary drastically according to their nationality, culture, length of stay, purpose of migration and economic levels, and other factors. It is important that policy makers take into account the differences amongst IEM as they illustrate the varying needs and difficulties in the integration process.

...the role of social capital for inclusion of IEM

Addressing cultural diversity through a social capital approach could have a positive influence on IEM integration. Research illustrates that differences in size, composition, structure and multiplicity of social support networks have an impact on the level of social integration, structure of social network and social support of IEM. Social network analysis enables better understanding of issues pertaining to migration processes, namely the reasons for migration, family regrouping, the formation of communities of compatriots, the acculturation process and social integration. However, relying entirely on a social capital approach could lead to the neglect of people who are isolated and disconnected from social networks and to understating the importance of also building individual capabilities.

…social computing could enable alternative ways and means to integrate IEM

Experts have acknowledged the potential driving force of new technologies to enable alternative ways and means to integrate IEM. Social computing applications may facilitate social relations and thus, could act as leverage for social capital. Their potential for IEM inclusion lies mainly in sustaining emotional attachment, enabling employment opportunities and could act as leverage for social participation and civic engagement.

Nevertheless, the ease of creating self-serving communities does not necessarily lead to social participation. Hence, a distinction should be made between the potential use of these applications and their actual use by IEM. Further more, the use of networking facilities of social computing applications could also have negative effects which need to be addressed, such as privacy related risks.

…exploration of selected domains

During the workshop three areas were explored in-depth, namely: take-up and use of online services, ICT in education and learning, and ICT for employment and access to capital.

… policy recommendations

The important role of third parties, intermediaries and NGOs should be recognised, and ways to support them should be devised to interlink them effectively. The promotion of good practice projects at an EU level, as well as opportunities to strengthen links between host and home countries through ICT should be better understood and exploited for the benefit of all the parties involved. Also, experts pointed out the potential role of the EC in ensuring non-conflicting regulation (e.g. on accessibility to online services and multi-language digital content provision) and promoting simpler government services.

The need for Europe to clarify its overall immigration policy approach and to endorse cultural diversity as an opportunity has been set as a priority by the EC. ICT, in particular new technological innovations, such as social computing present a major chance for Europe to strengthen IEM integration, to enhance social inclusion and to exploit technological progress.