

Digital Inclusion in Europe: Evaluating Policy and Practice



The **National Digital Conference** takes place in London today discussing “putting people at the heart of the opportunities digital can deliver”. Contributing to these discussions, our **Ellen Helsper** summarizes her recent **European Commission discussion paper** assessing European Digital Inclusion policies and argues that a focus on tangible outcomes linked to offline social inclusion targets is needed. She recommends a 6 step approach to more effective and sustainable Digital Inclusion policy development, implementation and evaluation.

Digital Inclusion is an individual’s effective and sustainable engagement with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in ways that allow full participation in society in terms of economic, social, cultural, civic and personal well-being. A digitally inclusive Europe is therefore a Europe in which all individuals, independent of their socio-cultural and socio-economic background, have equal opportunities to engage with ICT in such a way that a trend for increasing social inequality is halted if not reversed.

Development of the digital inclusion debate

Before discussing Digital Inclusion policy, it is important to understand that the focus within digital inclusion debates shifted from digital divides to gradations of inclusion[1]. This accompanied a shift in focus from universal access as the central aspect of digital inclusion to an emphasis on digital literacy and awareness around the benefits of ICT use for economic, social, cultural, civic and personal well-being among the general population. The latter asks for the incorporation of not only access, skills, and motivation indicators of digital inclusion but also a broad spectrum of uses of digital content and platforms so that citizens can engage with ICT to achieve tangible outcomes in these areas of everyday life (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Thematical development in the focus of digital inclusion debates



For classification and evaluation purposes **access** should be understood in terms of quality, ubiquity and mobility; **skills** as having technical, social, critical and creative elements; **motivation and awareness** of the benefits as being determined by both individual and social circumstances; and **engagement** as driven by the everyday life needs of individuals through content created by and for them so that engagement with ICT is effective and sustainable.

The **tangible outcomes** of digital inclusion policies should be linked to social inclusion targets specified in the **Europe2020** strategy and the **Social Investment Package** (SIP). This means that the desired outcomes of the implementation of digital agenda policies at the national level need to be defined in reference to increased social inclusion and not increased digital inclusion. Taking social outcomes for specific sectors, excluded groups and areas of social innovation as the starting point will make policy implementation more efficient and effective.

Any programme that aims to tackle digital exclusion should, therefore, take these 6 key steps to be successful and sustainable:

1. Identify what the *main social challenges* are and what the *desired outcomes* in terms of social inclusion and equality are;
2. Identify which *socio-demographic and socio-cultural groups are marginalised* in terms of the economic, social, civic, cultural and personal well-being outcomes identified under 1;
3. Identify to what extent these groups' *digital exclusion in terms of access, skills, motivation and content/engagement* inhibits reaching the desired outcomes;
4. Identify *the best organisations and locations* to reach and help those most in need;
5. Provide *resources* to organisations and individuals in these locations to lift the barriers to digital inclusion as identified under 3 for the specific challenges faced by these groups;
6. *Evaluate* the implementation and success of these initiatives by noting whether the groups *improved* their economic, social, civic, cultural and personal *wellbeing as a result of their increased digital engagement*.

Types of ICT access, literacy, motivation and engagement can then be linked to particular social outcomes for particular groups in particular countries. At the moment reporting on policy implementation is disconnected and refers only rarely to clear social investment targets for specific groups most at risk of digital and social exclusion. For example, increased access speeds and skills in the high end IT sector are important for European growth but do not tackle the issues associated with digital exclusion as encountered by socially excluded groups in their everyday lives and clearly identified as priorities under the SIP.

Conclusions

There are many different digital inclusion projects in the EU at the moment but in thinking about their effectiveness, the discussion needs to shift from 'how many?' questions to questions about 'why?' and 'for whom?' digital inclusion policy initiatives are implemented. Policy and implementation need to refocus from access and pure skills to meaningful engagement and tangible, social outcomes of ICT use by embedding digital inclusion into a number of different policy and regulation areas, notably the wider European policy landscape that deals with social challenges. While this might make it more difficult to implement it also makes evaluation of the actual achievements of the policies at a national level more transparent.

[1] For more on this shift see Helsper, E.J. (2012). A corresponding fields model of digital inclusion. *Communication Theory*, 22(4), 403-426, van Dijk, J.A.G.M. (2005) *The Deepening Divide*. Sage:London and Warschauer, M. (2004). *Technology and Social Inclusion. Rethinking the digital divide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

This article gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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