

eInclusion – Towards a Coherent European Policy Response to Social Inequalities in the Information Society.

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Abstract: As the Information Society turns from a concept to a European reality, the question of ensuring the accessibility and inclusiveness of such a society becomes impossible to ignore. EU policy makers are called on to draw up a coherent answer to this question but are facing considerable difficulties in doing so. Based upon interim results of the eInclusion@EU project this paper will present and analyse current practice related to eInclusion policy approaches and measures pursued at EU-level and also to some extent on national level. This analysis will yield the basic components for the development of a conceptual model for a "Vision of a Coherent European eInclusion Policy Model". The policy model developed is accompanied by a societal vision to go with its proposed implementation.

1. Introduction

In the wake of an increasing pervasiveness of networked Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) a scientific debate on the structural causes and impacts of the digital divide has emerged [1] [2]. Currently, different policy areas are dealing with the question on how to ensure equal access to ICTs for all population groups and to assure that everyone can benefit from ICT developments. Nevertheless, there is manifold evidence that – without an appropriate policy response – a cohesive and socially sustainable Information Society is unlikely to emerge.

In the EU, such policy activities are currently pursued under the headings of eInclusion and eAccessibility, where the term 'eInclusion' has come to wider use in relation to interventions addressing the issue of equal participation in the Information Society. However, eInclusion measures – up to now – seem to have focused on raising the level of ICT adoption among particular population groups rather than on effective inclusion of these groups into societal and economic processes.

Also, individual eInclusion measures pursued in the Member States seem to be rarely anchored in a coherent policy framework, and evidence on their impacts tends to be rarely available [3].

Accordingly, it seems necessary to take stock of existing eInclusion policy on European and national level, to set it against the theory-driven understanding of eInclusion as a societal and political concept and to come to an understanding of where the existing activities deviate from this theoretical ideal. This paper aims at contributing to paving the way for this assessment.

2. Objective & Methodology

Project Methodology

This paper has been prepared within the framework of the eInclusion@EU project, a coordination action funded under the EU's IST, set to provide scientific support to policies aimed at providing effective measures to ensure an inclusive Information Society [4].

The main objective of the project is the contribution to the development of "evidence-based" eInclusion and eAccessibility policies at EU and Member State levels. The primary approach involves: i) collation and analysis of policy-relevant information and data from across the EU and internationally; ii) identification of key topics for detailed analysis in the project; iii) preparation of syntheses of the state-of-the-art on these topics; and iv) convening and facilitation of workshops to support informed dialogue amongst the relevant stakeholders. On the basis of this, evidence-based policy roadmaps on the key topics will be developed to inform future policy.

The field of enquiry covering eInclusion and eAccessibility issues is very broad and accordingly the project has limited its work to several specific topics. In particular, the project is working closely with the European Commission services to ensure that the priority topics are aligned with the Commission's own priorities. In relation to this, three main topics have been identified – the eAccessibility component of eInclusion, eAccessibility and eInclusion in relation to work and employment and eAccessibility and eInclusion in relation to online services – as being the core concerns of the project. Within these three fields, the project works on a number of specific sub-themes. The selection of the sub-themes is oriented towards the identification of areas where the project is expected to make the most useful contribution, e.g. focusing on themes where there is already a clear political will but not yet any widely accepted consensus on harmonisation of policy and policy measures across the EU Member States.

Through the use of an evidence-based cross-national, multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder research methodology, including stakeholder workshops, on-site policy analysis by national correspondents and desk research, the project has gathered information on eInclusion policy and its implementation in all 25 EU Member States. The data collection in the Member States has taken place in three subsequent data gathering waves with the first wave starting in 2004 and the last wave completed at the end of 2006.

In a subsequent step, the information gathered has been synthesised to facilitate an informed dialogue between key eInclusion stakeholders through a number of workshops, in this way generating policy proposals that are both well grounded and practicable and are likely to accelerate progress towards the eInclusion and eAccessibility policy goals set in the context of the European Union's so called "Lisbon Strategy" and elsewhere [5].

Towards the end of its duration (end of 2006), the eInclusion@EU project now turns to achieving its overall objective: suggesting a coherent policy approach at EU level to ensure the equal participation of all in the Information Society. This will take the form of a policy roadmap to be presented to the European Commission for further consideration and as a guideline for future policy activities.

What is eInclusion?

eInclusion is concerned with the goal of ensuring that everyone is included in and gains from developments enabled by ICT. It can be seen as "a social movement whose goal is to end the digital divide, a term used to describe the fact that the world can be divided into people who do and people who don't have access to - and the capability to use - modern information technology (IT). According to advocates, e-inclusion has the power to: close

the gap between developed and less developed countries; promote democracy and mutual understanding; and empower disadvantaged individuals, such as the poor, the disabled, and the unemployed” [6].

The eInclusion@EU project has adopted a comprehensive definition of eInclusion since a clear understanding of the inter-relations of the eInclusion concept with the concept of eAccessibility is a necessary prerequisite both for effective policy making and for scientific research to meet policy needs. According to this understanding, the focus on eAccessibility has come from the traditions of disability research and disability policy. In this context, the notion of “accessibility” has been linked to the challenges that the environment can pose for people with disabilities. These include challenges presented by the physical environment for people with sensory and mobility disabilities and by the information/knowledge environment for people with intellectual disabilities. Hence, a central aspect of the eAccessibility approach is to ensure that the physical and information/knowledge dimensions of the Information Society are such that they do not make it harder for people with disabilities to use them, or even prevent them from using them at all. In addition to the eAccessibility component, eInclusion focuses also on the positive potential of the new tools and services of the Information Society to overcome previous barriers to accessibility that disadvantaged population groups had to face. Beyond access to the tools and services of the Information Society, beyond even digital literacy, a comprehensive definition of e-Inclusion should focus on people’s empowerment and participation in the knowledge society. Thus, skills and competences, awareness and willingness, social capital and the means to grow it are also key factors of e-Inclusion.

The term eInclusion (and its flip-side eExclusion) has come to be widely used in policy and research circles although not always with the same meaning or scope of coverage. In fact, three distinct yet interlinked perspectives can be discerned:

- Counteracting risks of digital exclusion (risk perspective), i.e. enabling all citizens to utilise the tools and applications of the Information Society - independently of their functional and mental abilities, their health status, their age, their gender, their income and socio-economic status, the place where they live, or any other structural life circumstance or personal characteristic that may hinder them in doing so;
- Exploiting ICT opportunities for social cohesion (opportunities perspective), i.e. exploiting the potential of a knowledge-based society to fully integrate formerly socially excluded population groups and those at-risk of exclusion, including enabling at-risk individuals to take their own steps to improve their situation with the help of ICT-based services;
- Promoting inclusive processes of ICT development and deployment (structural perspective), i.e. ensuring that ICT development (e.g. new applications emerging in the context of converging media platforms) and deployment processes (e.g. in the health and educational sectors) that shape our reality in a maturing knowledge-based society adequately consider the needs and requirements of population groups that are structurally disadvantaged (e.g. in relation to the aging population and other groups with particular user requirements) through the consistent consideration of the design-for-all philosophy at all stages of the development and deployment process.

Furthermore, one has to consider eInclusion as a moving target which is closely linked to the continuing process of technological innovation. For instance, technological innovation keeps raising new challenges in relation to availability, accessibility and usability of ICT based products and services for certain population groups.

eInclusion target groups

eInclusion has to deal with groups at the margin of society and are therefore in danger of being excluded. In line with the concepts of eAccessibility and eInclusion, people with disabilities and older people have been the core target groups for a long time. Nowadays, the eInclusion approach goes far beyond these two target groups by focusing on all societal groups that may be at risk of exclusion from the Information Society or of not having equal opportunities to benefit from it. This encompasses different segments of the overall population such as women, people with low income or low educational attainment, the unemployed, ethnic minorities, people living in isolated rural areas and so on. In addition to the consideration of individuals, the scope of eInclusion must consider communities as well, since community membership is an important component of inclusion of individuals, through e.g. processes of capital building [7] [8]. The strategic challenge for eInclusion policies is twofold: on the one hand to ensure that all these population groups do not "fall through the net" in the sense that they are unable to use ICTs due to functional restrictions; on the other hand to explore the potential for social inclusion by opening up new – ICT-mediated – means of participation.

3. Results: Current Policy Approaches in the European Union

Necessitated by the nature of its subject, today's eInclusion policy is generally based upon three main pillars: technology, benefits and target groups. These three pillars can be brought together to form a first and rough eInclusion policy model (cf. Figure 1).

Technology – or ICTs more exactly – stands at the heart of eInclusion policy, as its prime goal is to ensure the access to and profitable use of ICT. In this context, technology is not seen as an end in itself but as a means to bring about what is called the Single European Information Space that has the potential to strengthen innovation and investment (i.e. to promote economic growth) and – more important here – to help achieving an inclusive European Information Society [9]. If ICT is not simply an end in itself but is assumed to truly bring about the economic and societal changes attributed to it, then it must somehow create certain impacts or – in the case of eInclusion – benefits, to be reaped by those who are not included. Benefits therefore form the second pillar of eInclusion policy (for some concrete examples of benefits ICT can offer to disadvantaged population groups cf. section 4). In turn, these benefits cannot form the end point of eInclusion policy. A policy stopping here would have the character of a cliff-hanger, creating benefits that no one can benefit from. The last pillar, therefore, introduces the beneficiaries of eInclusion policy, its target groups.

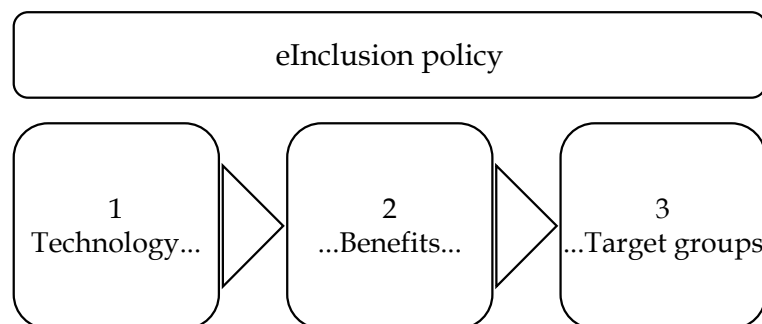


Figure 1: An initial eInclusion policy model

This initial model yet fails to satisfy in terms of concreteness. At least two questions must be answered before it can be transformed into a truly comprehensive and coherent policy approach:

1. What are the (operationalisable) key themes of eInclusion policy hitherto described only in very general terms?
2. What exactly are the benefits to be brought about with the help of ICT for the good of the target groups?

To come to a set of concrete and operationalisable key eInclusion policy themes it is necessary to review existing EU policy documents targeting – directly or indirectly – eInclusion. These documents can be found in different parts of the European policy space as responsibility for eInclusion and eAccessibility issues in Europe is spread between several central EU bodies, the Member States and the European regions as well as across different thematic policy areas. The following list represents a selection of the key policy documents – as seen by the authors – and does not aim to be exhaustive. Especially with regard to the national and regional level the considerable amount of material available would exceed the scope of this paper by far, so only a quick synthesis is given here. For the interested reader the online Knowledge Base of the eInclusion@EU project provides a good entry point to this wide field and a structuring of the wealth of information available [10].

Among policy documents coming from the European Union, the two most recent ones are the communication “i2010 – A European Information Society for growth and employment” [11] and the eAccessibility communication [12]. The first proposes a strategic framework in line with the renewed Lisbon Strategy to promote an open and competitive digital economy emphasising ICT as a driver of inclusion and quality of life, while the second, referring to the goals of i2010, stresses the importance of eAccessibility in this context and calls on Member States and industry to follow a consistent eAccessibility approach. Other policy documents referring to eInclusion can be found e.g.

- in the EU's information society policy, particularly in the framework of the eEurope initiatives, under the heading of "participation in the knowledge-based society", and in FP6/IST under the heading of "eInclusion";
- in standardisation policy (for example in mandates given to the technical standards bodies ETSI and CEN/CENELEC in relation to accessibility standards for telecommunications equipment);
- in telecommunication policy (in the provisions in the Universal Service Directive in relation to meeting the needs of low income and disabled people);
- in the context of the general social policy of the EU, mainly under the headings of "fight against poverty and social exclusion", "equal opportunities", "disability" and "ageing";
- to some extent also in education policy, under the heading of "e-learning" and "digital literacy", with the objective of ensuring that Europe's youth is digitally literate when leaving school and that everyone has the opportunity to become digitally literate
- in EU health policy, mainly with the objective of making available quality eHealth services for all.

As regards eInclusion measures pursued in the member states of the European Union, the information available suggests that isolated initiatives seem to prevail rather than a comprehensive strategy. This impression is also backed by the eAccessibility communication when it aims to “convey to Member States the urgent need to work together towards a consistent approach to e-accessibility” [13]. Also, in many cases eInclusion related policy measures seem to be characterised by a strong supply side bias with a focus on raising the level of ICT adoption among particular population groups rather than on effective inclusion of these groups in societal and economic processes.

The analysis of the policy documents named above and of the related current political and societal debate yields four key areas of eInclusion policy

Combating eExclusion aims at enabling all people to utilise the tools, applications and services of the Information Society – independently of their functional and mental abilities, their health status, their age, their gender, their income and socio-economic status, the place where they live, or any other structural or personal characteristic that may hinder them in doing so. Implementations of this overall objective are usually grouped under the heading of eAccessibility. Concrete measures under this heading include, among others, the lowering of technical barriers like inaccessible websites, but also measures targeted at (potential) users like reducing access costs and raising the ICT skills level.

Inclusive eServices stands for the inclusiveness of services provided via the Internet like, for instance, eGovernment, eHealth, eLearning and eCommerce. As such online applications increasingly penetrate all spheres of life, their utilisation as well as non-utilisation can have an impact on people's every day life, on market developments and on the society as a whole. Traditional patterns of service provision will be more and more replaced by online service provision and those without access are thus facing a growing social disadvantage. The inclusiveness of services is related both to a technology component (people requiring the technology to be as user-friendly as possible) and to a service component (users having needs with regard to the service itself).

Independent Living describes the arrangement of the individual living environment in a way that allows a self-determined way of life. Although the housing space plays a fundamental role in this regard, the concept of Independent Living goes a step further, encompassing also social contacts to friends, relatives and neighbours and the wider environment – neighbourhood, city, region. From an ICT point-of-view the so-called Independent Living Technologies (ILT) are the focus of attention. These comprises all ICT applications with a potential to benefit disadvantaged people in terms of their ability to live independent of help, such as, for instance, smart homes or mobile alarm devices for calling the police or medical assistance.

eServices for Social Inclusion is to be understood in a sense that the Information Society is not all risks, but also offers a number of opportunities or even clear-cut benefits for population groups at-risk of being socially excluded. This means that ICTs in general but even more specific applications and services can help those people to increasingly participate in societal life. Examples are, for instance, online learning platforms for illiterate people lowering the barriers to participate by means of their anonymity or online services offered to low-income households via alternative platforms like digital TV.

The last component missing is the collation of the concrete benefits eInclusion offers its target groups. Together, all three components will allow to build a refined policy model that is coherent and ready to be transposed into practical policy making. The benefits provided by an inclusive Information Society are best grouped according to the four key policy themes. These leads to a more structured presentation and allows to illustrate the diversity of benefits over the different fields of application in the overall eInclusion domain. Due to this diverse nature, the list of benefits presented here is by no means exhaustive, but open to expansion, a characteristic which is also necessitated by the short product cycles in the ICT world.

For the theme of Combating eExclusion the main benefit lies in an increased accessibility of ICT products and services. This goes from website accessibility over affordable internet connections to raised ICT skills levels, covering technical and user-centred aspects of accessibility. Similarly, eServices can profit from eInclusion in a way that they become more accessible, a goal which is increasingly difficult to reach as eServices like eGovernment or eHealth become more and more complex. Another aspect is an increase in social participation when such services reach formerly excluded people. The benefits to be reaped from eInclusion in Independent Living are probably the most multifarious: they range from an increased independency in everyday life and increased

quality of life to the activation of personal resources – e.g. in the case of older or disabled people – that might otherwise not have been tackled. eServices for Social Inclusion, contrary to inclusive eServices of general public interest, are designed to be of dedicated help for certain disadvantaged population groups. Benefits are widely ranged and depend on the respective target groups. For instance, services and content that are adapted to the particular needs of disadvantaged population groups provide the potential to increase the likelihood that disadvantaged people can exploit them for their own purposes. There is some evidence that the use of ICTs is a means of providing services, e.g. learning courses for illiterate people, in a more anonymous manner and thus, providing the potential of overcoming existing inhibitions and social stigma.

4. Conclusions: The Way Ahead

Bringing together the three components – key themes, target groups and benefits – now allows to take the development of a coherent policy approach to its next and – for the time being – final step: our vision of a coherent European eInclusion policy model.

Towards a Coherent European eInclusion Policy Model: Our Vision

What must eInclusion policy accomplish in order to reach its goal, an inclusive Information Society for all? What are its main fields of application? What benefits can it achieve for what target groups? These are – basically – the questions, a coherent eInclusion policy model should set out to answer. Our analysis so far has given the individual answers to each of these questions. Our renewed eInclusion policy model aims not only at combining these answers but also at allowing to take the next step: implementation into practical policy.

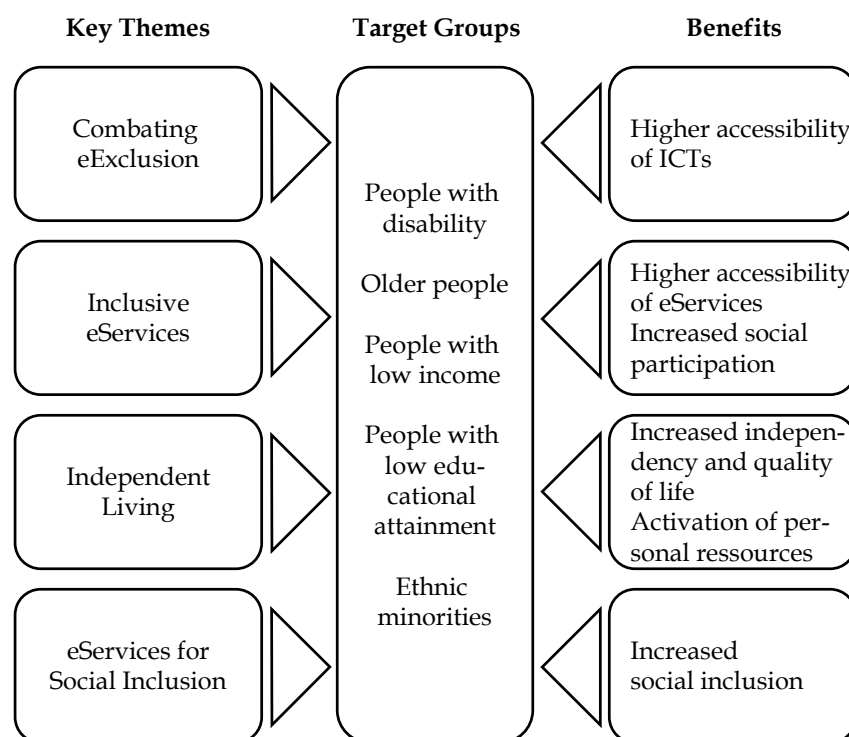


Figure 2: A new eInclusion policy model

The model will allow to analyse existing eInclusion policy, to identify gaps – especially in the representation of target groups – and to formulate appropriate and viable policy actions to fill these gaps. Coming from its first, deductive version, the renewed eInclusion policy model is depicted in Figure 2. At the centre of this model stand the target

groups, the main beneficiaries of eInclusion policy: people with disability, older people, people with low income or low educational attainment and ethnic minorities, as well as all other population at-risk groups, some of which might only emerge in the future. These target groups benefit from eInclusion policy in a two-fold way: first from the political work done in the four fields of the eInclusion domain, i.e. in the fight against eExclusion, in Independent Living and in the creation of inclusive eServices as well as of specific eServices for social inclusion. Second, they avail themselves of the real-life benefits this work produces, which is mainly an increased accessibility of ICT products and services, increased social participation, integration and individual independence, as well as a higher quality of life.

When comparing the first and the second model, two differences might catch the readers eye. First, the “Technology” component seemingly has disappeared. We emphasise ‘seemingly’ as it is present still, albeit in an immanent form. Making stronger allowance for the consideration that ICT is not an end-in-itself but a means to the end of – in this case – eInclusion, we have embedded the technology component both into the four key policy themes and into the benefits, where it is still very much at the heart of things (eServices without ICT are, for instance, quite unimaginable, as is web accessibility without the internet). The second difference is that the eInclusion target groups have left their position at the end of the process and have moved to the centre of eInclusion policy.

Both differences point towards what we have called “a Vision of a Coherent European eInclusion Policy Model”. According to this vision, eInclusion policy in the EU, in its Member States and in the regions will come to full effect only if a technology-centred view is finally and consequently replaced by a people-centred view, which puts the user first instead of industry, researchers or shareholders. In four words: eInclusion policy profits people. At least – as a toll to reality – primarily.

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