Foreword

Social and economic exclusion should, more than ever before, be central to our efforts to build a sustainable, fair, and prosperous world. Economic turmoil, climate change, and globalisation not only affect nations and populations as a whole, but also strike at the heart of families and affect individuals, and most often those that were already at risk of being left behind.

In today’s world, and certainly in tomorrow’s, the digital world and the ‘real’ world increasingly blend together. Information and communication technologies (ICT) get intimately interwoven with everyday activities such as education, work, social support, shopping, and human communication. Not being able to fully take part in the information society, the digital divide, will become as much a barrier to economic and social participation as not being able to fully receive education or being in poverty—and often these factors go together.

Nevertheless, digital exclusion is still very much around. Global digital divides, for example, disparities in access to the internet, are striking, and also inside the more connected countries there are significant lags in access to, accessibility of, motivation and skills to use, and actual usage of information technology. The groups concerned are notably those with low income or education, old age, or disability.

Gradually, we are getting more evidence about the extent of the relationship between digital exclusion and economic/social exclusion. This book is an important contribution to this evidence base. We need such evidence, as policy makers, as disadvantaged users and user representatives, as business people, and as academics.

Policy makers have been moving digital inclusion more central to their information society/digital economy agendas. They recognise the vicious cycle between digital exclusion and economic/social exclusion. Or, formulating this more positively: actions to promote digital inclusion and social and economic inclusion may leverage each other, creating a virtuous cycle. Again, more evidence of this expectation. At the micro-level we need well-documented good practices cases that inspire replication and adaptation. At the macro-level we need bridges between digital inclusion and finance, economics, social affairs, health, or education.

The European Commission has, during the past decade, in its eEurope and i2010 information society policies, given much attention to digital inclusion. Action plans are now being implemented that address widespread broadband connectivity (and the economic crisis has triggered further plans to support broadband roll-out), accessibility of ICT for people with disabilities, ICT-enabled independent living for elderly persons, inclusive e-government services, and digital literacy. A recent Commission Staff Working Paper has closely linked the digital inclusion agenda to the EU’s Renewed Social Agenda.

The implementation of these policies and their further development require a continued and critical analysis of digital divides and their-evolving-interplay with economic and social exclusion in general.
The Commission provided an indicative assessment of the (significant) economic benefits of digital inclusion as part of its 2007 e-inclusion policy. An extensive collection of good practice cases, amongst them the 2008 European e-Inclusion Award winners, has been established. But these pieces of evidence need to be enriched and further quantified.

In this respect, the focus on economic impact is very important indeed, but in the spirit of Putnam’s seminal work on social capital we also need to strengthen evidence on the impact of digital inclusion on community involvement, social cohesion, and social capital in general, as well the contribution of digitally-enabled social capital to better health, better quality of life when ageing, lower levels of crime, better education results, and so forth.

Finally, there are important questions arising from the study of digital divides concerning ethics and digital inclusion, for example, is there a right to opt out from the information society, governance and the transformative potential of digital inclusion, for example, to what extent can and will users at risk of exclusion become shapers of technologies and policies themselves, motivation to be digitally included, for example, for which immediate needs is digital access and digital literacy really relevant, partnerships that are needed more than in other fields because the market dynamics is often not present, and sustainable inclusive ICT business models.

This book makes an important contribution to strengthening our evidence base, advancing answers, and posing new questions. The insights of the authors can help all of us to deliver on the promise of digital inclusion.

ENDNOTES

1 See www.ec.europa.einclusion.
2 See www.epractice.eu
3 Paul Timmers is head of the unit ICT for Inclusion at the European Commission. Opinions expressed here are the author’s and do not necessarily represent the views of the European Commission.

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