Chapter 4

ICT: Obstacle or Enabler for Social Inclusion? The Impacts of New Technologies on Governance

Sylvia Archmann
European Institute of Public Administration, The Netherlands

Astrid Guiffart
European Institute of Public Administration, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This analyzes how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can be used by governments to involve all citizens in society life through increased access to education, employment, public services, as well as participating in decision-making. Given the risks of deeper social exclusion associated with the lack of digital competences or capabilities, targeted measures to encourage ICT engagement may strategically be implemented to provide equal opportunities. Furthermore, digital technologies open up new communication channels that governments can use to deliver valuable citizen-oriented public services and foster social and political involvement. In order to reach inclusiveness and participation objectives, technology is obviously not enough. Some commitment to openness and transparency, as well as an effective assessment of policy outcomes range among the pillars of a successful approach to digital governance.

INTRODUCTION

As information and communication technologies (ICT) progressively embed all activities of our everyday lives, our way of living, working or maintaining social relations is also transformed. However, not all citizens are able to benefit from the myriad of opportunities offered by ICT. This discrepancy in the use of digital tools makes it difficult for the less connected citizens to participate on equal terms in economic, social or political interactions. Defined as the societal imperative of ensuring that all citizens can take part in society, social inclusion falls under the responsibility of governments since they are vested with a public interest mission in democratic systems.
Being a knowledge enabler and communication facilitator, information technology has the potential to offer huge benefits to citizens. Yet, the ever-growing influence of the internet and online services on lifestyle may also contribute to leaving behind most disadvantaged people. Consequently, the role of ICT as regards social inclusion has to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. At a time when an increasing part of government and economic transactions are performed digitally, the need to enable citizens to benefit from online potentialities is becoming all the more acute.

This chapter will deal with the impact of information and communication technology on governments’ efforts to promote social inclusion, while analysing the conditions in which a better digital inclusion may be achieved for the benefit of all. More than a mere policy objective, inclusion is considered in this chapter as a principle for governance – understood as the interaction between the public sector and civil society for collective decision-making (Castro Sardi, Mlikota, 2002). Which governance patterns are likely to foster citizens’ inclusion and social participation in the Knowledge Society? What are the challenges and opportunities brought about by ICT in terms of inclusion?

First of all, we will consider social inclusion in the context of a digitally-based society. The question of adopting adequate policy measures to overcome the digital divide will be examined in light of the revised European agenda for inclusive growth. Secondly, beyond citizens’ access to information technology, we will discuss some fundamental aspects of eGovernance for enabling people’s participation in public and political life. The use of information and communication technologies by governments to deliver improved services and wider information to constituents needs to be based on a commitment to interaction and openness for both, encouraging use and building confidence.

Finally, choosing citizens’ involvement as a driver for providing high-quality government services entails a number of practical implications for the way public authorities act towards constituents. When it comes to eInclusion Government efforts need to be properly measured and evaluated in order to assess the public value outcome. Using the Return on Investment criteria for monitoring the benefits of inclusion policies is a valuable way of sustaining investments in times of the financial crisis. Moreover, some hints will be proposed to the reader for further reflection on an ICT-enabled open government.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AT STAKE
IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY

The Multiple Dimensions of Social Inclusion and its Links to ICT

Social inclusion is the main objective of governments’ policies dedicated to compensating for disadvantage and providing equal opportunities for citizens to take part in society. By social inclusion, we refer not only to citizens’ participation in the labour market and economic life, but also their involvement in broader aspects of society, in terms of community, cultural and political integration (Brants, Frissen, 2003). In contrast, socially excluded people are those being marginalised because of their lack of financial resources or capabilities, ranging from ill health, poor educational attainment, to being elderly, disabled, unemployed or living in a remote area. This exclusion from the rest of society encompasses both quantitative and qualitative factors, combining social isolation with economic disadvantage (Helsper, 2008). In this respect, beyond poverty reduction, social inclusion entails an active policy commitment to integrate citizens as members of the whole society.
Related Content

E-Government Adoption in the U.K.: XBRL Project
www.igi-global.com/article/government-adoption-xbrl-project/78303?camid=4v1a

E-Governance and Natural Hazards in Mozambique: A Challenge for Backasting Method Used for Flood Risk Management Strategies
www.igi-global.com/chapter/e-governance-and-natural-hazards-in-mozambique/115679?camid=4v1a

A Location-Aware Architecture for an IoT-Based Smart Museum
www.igi-global.com/article/a-location-aware-architecture-for-an-iot-based-smart-museum/162737?camid=4v1a

E-Government in Namibia
www.igi-global.com/chapter/e-government-in-namibia/115677?camid=4v1a