Characterizing e-Inclusion Intermediary Actors in Europe: Exploring the Role of Third Sector Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Digital and social inclusion intermediaries play a crucial role in providing digital literacy to excluded groups and in using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support social inclusion. However, information on the main characteristics of these actors is lacking. This paper presents the preliminary results of part of the MIREIA research conducted by the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies of the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, which aimed to characterise eInclusion intermediary actors in Europe and measure their socio-economic impact. This article explores the role of third sector organisations in the broader landscape of eInclusion intermediary actors. It first presents a conceptualization of the role and impacts of eInclusion intermediary actors, based on the results of a literature review and detailed ‘locality mappings’ conducted in three areas in Europe, in order to provide a definition of these actors. It then presents the methodology and main findings of an online survey designed to provide a ‘map’ of the eInclusion actors operating in Europe, answering the following questions: What are eInclusion actors? How can they be classified? Which services do they provide, to which targets groups?, and finally How do they operate and innovate? Findings show that the vast majority of eInclusion actors in the third sector are small organizations, in terms of staff numbers and budget, providing ICT services mainly to senior citizens, young adults and unemployed people. The results are consistent with the theoretical framework proposed and thus confirm that the configuration of the main characteristics of eInclusion intermediary actors is influenced by several factors including these actors’ own intrinsic characteristics (mission, human and financial resources, etc.) and the external conditions (institutional environment, needs of the population where they operate, etc.). At the same time, these external factors and the different features of the intermediaries are linked and interrelated. These preliminary conclusions point to the fact that, despite the limitations inherent in the approach used, the findings presented in this paper can be considered relevant because: 1) they are the results of the first attempt in Europe to collect primary data from eInclusion intermediary actors and aim to create at least a baseline for future research; 2) the link between this activity and policy-making at EU level and the direct involvement of pan-European stakeholders and practitioners from the field will form the basis for further research and policy actions, informed by the results of the investigation; 3) the findings of the analysis provide useful insights and help shed light on the diversity and role of eInclusion intermediary actors and the contributions of their programmes to advancing social and economic inclusion in Europe. Further research is, however, required to systematise the findings and confirm the preliminary results with more in-depth investigation and analysis.

Keywords: eInclusion, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Intermediaries, Nonprofit Organisations, Telecentres, Third Sector

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1. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play an essential role in supporting daily life in today’s digital society. The policy of the European Union on e-Inclusion aims to ensure that ‘no one is left behind’ in enjoying the benefits of ICTs. e-Inclusion means both inclusive ICTs and the use of ICTs to achieve wider inclusion objectives. It focuses on participation of all individuals and communities in all aspects of the Information Society.

The eInclusion concept in the literature has mainly been defined in relation to what has been discussed in the political arena. In this respect, digital inclusion goals have recently been taken further in the context of the Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE), a flagship initiative of the Europe 2020 strategy. This is of particular importance in today’s conditions of financial turmoil and socio-economic crisis in which governments are facing increasing budget constraints and are in search of new ways to address mounting unemployment and limited growth in most European countries (Misuraca et al., JRC-IPTS, 2012).

Here, digital and social inclusion intermediaries can play a crucial role, by providing digital literacy to excluded groups and also by using ICT to advance social inclusion goals for groups at risk. They can help members of groups at risk to acquire new skills or help them to be better positioned to search for employment. Some of these intermediaries - third sector and not-for-profit organisations - play an important role in the eInclusion landscape. However, these actors have received limited policy attention so far, even though there is a growing awareness of their crucial contribution to achieving the goals set out in the DAE.

Research on the role of ICTs in advancing social and economic inclusion goals has a long standing tradition in academia. Although the theoretical origins of this research lie at the intersection between two academic disciplines - communications and development – the last decade has seen research emerging not only from academia but also from policy and action-oriented research institutes and international organizations. This is theoretically diverse and multidisciplinary in nature and not yet consolidated in terms of implications it has for policy and practice (Garrido et al., JRC-IPTS, 2012).

In particular, not enough is known about the role of intermediary actors in improving socio-economic inclusion, the social needs they fulfill and the impact of their programmes on the communities and groups they serve. In 2012, therefore, the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (JRC-IPTS) launched a research project on Measuring the Impact of eInclusion Intermediary Actors (MIREIA). One of the objectives of MIREIA is to map and characterize the eInclusion intermediary actors active in Europe in order to better understand who these eInclusion actors are, which services they provide to which targets groups, how they operate and innovate, and how they can be classified. At the same time, it also aims to suggest a plausible estimate of the size and distribution of the eInclusion actors in Europe.

This article’s rationale is therefore based on the need to better understand and characterise the diverse set of actors involved in implementing e-Inclusion policies in Europe. The main research questions addressed by this part of the study are: who are eInclusion Intermediary actors, how do they work and how do they have an impact on digital and social inclusion policy goals?

In order to address these questions, an extensive literature review was first carried out. It covered an analysis of the third sector, defined by Haché & Centeno (2011) as ‘on the one hand, civil society, understood as citizens carrying out activities individually, without being motivated by coercion or monetary profit, and, on the other hand, as Third Sector Organizations (TSO), which carry out collective actions, freely decided and self-organized by citizens under the umbrella of an organization (formal or informal)’. It also looked at the use of ICT by civil society organizations and the potential impact of ICT on their structures and the establishment of networks, and recent works...
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