

**Promoting Accessible Social Dialogue and Innovative
Training Practices:
Towards an Information Society for All**

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**WP5
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**ADDRESSING SOCIAL
EXCLUSION VIA THE
e-LEARNING MODEL**

This report is also available online at
http://www.socialdialogue.net/en/en_results.htm

Abstract:

This report discusses how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and on-line services can be used to break down traditional barriers which exclude some of the most disadvantaged groups in our society. New technologies can serve to distribute knowledge more creatively and more equally. They allow faster and easier access to public services. However, digital literacy and securing access to these technologies are essential if "e-Learning" can be used to its full potential.

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1. Introduction

Europe is a prosperous continent, and the strength of its economy generates considerable wealth, and creates jobs. Both are essential for sustaining high standards of living and quality of life. Moreover, Member States have developed comprehensive mechanisms to ensure a degree of redistribution of the prosperity resulting from the competitive economy, in particular through their social protection systems. However, a significant number of Europeans still live in poverty and are subject to social exclusion on account of structural and attitudinal barriers.

The ever-accelerating changes which reshape our economies and societies are likely to exacerbate vulnerability and increase the risks of social exclusion, affecting in particular those who have not acquired the skills necessary to succeed in the innovation and knowledge-based activities as well as those who, for various reasons, are not participating in the labour market. This applies in particular to people with various disabilities.

1.1 What is Social Exclusion?

An individual person is socially excluded when he can't give anything to society, in exchange for what society gives him. Another definition says that an individual is socially excluded when he doesn't fit in the dominant view of society.

Another possible definition says that social exclusion can emerge when two groups are separated from each other. These groups can be religious movements, ethnic minorities, or people with certain disabilities etc.

It is important to note that someone can be socially excluded but doesn't feel so. It should also be mentioned that, in practice, people are not likely to be totally included or excluded, but that people are more or less included or excluded in "mainstream" society.

2. Structural Changes Creating Potential New Risks

The structural changes occurring across the EU which can lead to new risks of poverty and social exclusion for particularly vulnerable groups (unless the appropriate policy responses are developed) are:

- major structural changes in the labour market resulting from a period of very rapid economic change and globalisation;
- the very rapid growth of the knowledge-based society and Information and Communication Technologies;
- the increasing number of people living longer coupled with falling birth rates resulting in growing dependency ratios;
- a growing trend towards ethnic, cultural and religious diversity fuelled by international migration and increased mobility within the Union;
- increase in women's access to the labour market and changes in household structures.

3. Potential of ICT to Fight Social Exclusion

Information and communication technologies (ICT) and on-line services have a wide potential for breaking down traditional barriers which exclude the most disadvantaged in our society. New technologies can serve to distribute knowledge more creatively and more equally. They allow faster and easier access to public services. However, digital literacy is a must for seizing the job opportunities of the knowledge society.

A recent report drawn up by the Commission's services together with a high-level working group highlights a broad range of best practices to tap these opportunities. But Eurobarometer data presented in this report also underline that huge gaps in ICT access and literacy persist, and that digital exclusion is more and more felt as a real barrier in people's lives.

There is not just one digital divide but *multiple divides* which relate to gender, class, age, race and ethnicity. More fundamentally, conceptualisations and policies that characterise the digital divide as primarily being about access to digital technologies need to be rethought: a more helpful approach would be to go beyond access to the 'technical kit' and to consider the social relations around the uses of technologies.

3.1 Particularly Vulnerable Groups of Disabled People

Empirical evidence suggests that certain groups of disabled people are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion. There is, for example, a clear correlation between the severity of the impairment and the degree of poverty and exclusion experienced by an individual disabled person. Older disabled people, whose impairments are of a degenerative nature are at extreme risk. Disabled people living in institutions do not generally encounter dire financial poverty, however they do experience extreme social exclusion; their opportunities to participate in mainstream society are practically non-existent and their participation in decisions affecting their life quality on a daily basis are limited to the extreme.

3.1.1 Barriers to Employment

All of the literature and research to date spotlights the critical role which employment plays to ensure that disabled people avoid poverty and social exclusion. It is very important to stress however that this is not exclusively about the financial security which having a job implies – it also very much about participation, status, and a sense of belonging to a community. If out-of-work parents can get a job, this also helps to eliminate social exclusion being transferred to the next generation's children, and to give them every opportunity for social integration.

There is a fundamental link between education and social exclusion per se. The area where you live, the accessibility of the infrastructure around you, the policy priorities at national, regional and local level will govern whether a disabled child is able to receive a truly inclusive education, with all the social as well as academic benefits that this brings.

The socialisation dimension in education is extremely important for disabled children as well as for non-disabled children that can mutually benefit from being in the same educational environment. An inclusive education is at the basis of an inclusive society, as it contributes strongly to the breaking down of attitudinal barriers.

A majority of disabled children can benefit from a mainstream education. According to a survey conducted by the Danish Authorities, only 0,9% of children cannot take part in education in mainstream schools. These are for instance children with complex dependency needs, such as autistic children.

It is important that in all those cases, special education and support to the families is provided. Moreover families and children must be involved in the assessment of their educational needs; these cannot be left only to the public authorities or to the school.

When in mainstream education, disabled children are often not granted the educational, technical and personal support they need, and as a consequence are isolated within their own classroom or group. Moreover this support must be extended to all the school courses, including non academic activities organised by the school.

3.1.2 Barriers to Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning

A key factor governing a disabled person's opportunity to compete on equal terms in the labour market will be their educational attainment, their access to quality education at all levels and their on-going access to skills acquisition as adults.

The social exclusion strategy can be an important opportunity to develop policies on how to prepare disabled workers of the future; their education in all its guises, training and re-training for jobs and lifelong learning.

The European Social Fund constitutes the primary source of investment to pump-prime long-term sustainable change in this area. It is important that the National social inclusion plans make full use of this instrument in order to promote quality and innovative lifelong training of disabled people.

3.1.3 Barriers to Participation in the Information Society

Information Technology could have a pivotal role in promoting, training and employment opportunities for disabled people, but is not the only panacea.

The EU member States have committed in one of the common objectives on the fight against social exclusion to exploit "fully the potential of the knowledge-based society and of new information communication technologies", but also to "ensure that no one is excluded, taking particular account of the needs of disabled people".

In recent years, the European Institutions have demonstrated their commitment to and the necessity for an "e-Europe", which was affirmed in the declarations of the Lisbon Summit of June 2000.

The targets of the e-Europe Action Plan 2002 and its subsequent update (2005) and extension to the New EU Member States (eEurope+), also reflect the high risk that disabled people are excluded from the Information Society or that it may increase their isolation and exclusion by minimising the 'human factor'. An example of this might be in teleworking: a disabled person working from home, may be isolated, without adequate work support structures or direct human interaction.

3.1.4 Benefits of ICTs in a Social Exclusion Context

Organisations and agencies involved with combating social exclusion are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits that the newer Information and Communication

Technologies (ICTs) can bring. The Internet, electronic mail, groupware, bulletin boards, newsgroups, video-conferencing; these are all examples of ICTs that have the capacity to decrease marginalisation and empower people to participate more fully by giving greater access to information and enabling them to build new or stronger connections to sources of support and assistance.

Whether individually owned or provided by an agency or community group, ICTs can bring four major benefits to any socially excluded group:

- Opening up new communication links or building on those already existing, both amongst excluded groups or agencies and between them.
- Easier location of, and access to, information resources and support agencies.
- Improving the range, focus and delivery of services and advice on offer.
- More opportunities to increase skill levels through education and training.

These benefits can have a profound and far-reaching impact on all types of social exclusion, in part because of the features of ICTs themselves, namely:

- Location independence.
- Asynchronous use – senders and receivers of information do not have to be connected at the same time.
- Signifiers of social status and identity are hidden (apart from video-conferencing).
- Fast, cheap and easy-to-use means of communicating with others.
- Multiple simultaneous access to Web resources.
- Ability to link Web pages together.
- Cheap and relatively easy self-publishing.
- Use both encourages and enables the development of marketable computing skills.
- Encourages collaboration and networking on a local, national and international level.

The location independence of ICTs is a major factor in their importance to combating social exclusion. Location can be a marginalizing constraint on people whose mobility is restricted, be they elderly, chronically ill, disabled, carers, without their own transport in rural areas with little public provision or those who simply do not have enough money to travel. E-mail, groupware, video-conferencing and the Internet can all provide access to information and sources of help (e.g. home shopping, rural net, government social services), as well as opening up the possibility of distance learning or working from the home).

In addition, ICTs provide otherwise isolated individuals the opportunity to make contact with others in similar positions, via notice boards, web sites or e-mail, regardless of their location. This can help to build new relationships that might otherwise be unsustainable. Combined with the asynchronous nature of ICTs (other than video-conferencing), it is possible for people to make use of these resources where and when is most convenient for them.

Video-conferencing apart, ICTs also provide an element of anonymity, which acts to strip away many of the signifiers of social status and identity that can contribute to the exclusion of certain groups. Ethnic background, gender, age, disability and appearance are all examples of differences that can limit or bias interaction and access to services. Text-based communication makes these distinctions less obvious and should allow these groups more equitable participation in communication and access to information and advice.

Education, training and employment opportunities are all increased by the use of ICTs as a wide range of online advice agencies give advice and information about where and how to find services. Although the use of ICTs in itself helps to increase computing skills and boost employability, online education and training via distance learning or electronic tutorials can support learning even more. In addition, virtual employment agencies detail job vacancies and enable online applications. As mentioned before, teleworking may also increase the chances of finding employment for those in rural areas or lacking mobility.

Advice agencies and community groups also have a strong role to play, both in making ICT hardware more freely available to socially excluded groups and as providers of information and support. By using ICTs, existing, sometimes geographically dispersed, community agencies can be brought closer together to form a more comprehensive and cohesive network. Greater communication between agencies can foster better co-operation and co-ordination of services and reduce duplication of effort. Individual Web-based resources can also be linked together to provide a wider number of users with easier access to a more seamless source of help and information.

Community meeting points of all kinds, community centres, schools, cafes, even supermarkets, can be used to provide shared public access to ICTs to those otherwise excluded and indeed, their 'non-techie' environment can be used to engage people with few computing skills to feel comfortable learning. For those who cannot travel to community centres, ICTs can come to them via outreach programmes. As well as providing excluded individuals with greater links to information and services, and each other, this also creates a connection between individuals and the advice agencies themselves; direct communication with the community can help service providers to identify community needs more clearly and tailor their services accordingly.

4. Conclusion

An accessible, user-friendly web environment to support lifelong learning. e-Learning (electronic distribution of courseware) is used in the SDV-NetJob project as a training tool targeting the integration of disabled people in the labour market.

The course participants in this case are not the disabled people themselves but the Chief Executives and Human Resource managers in companies, as it is especially individuals in these positions who can open the door of enterprises to the employment of disabled people on equal terms.

Used appropriately, we can make a strong contribution to the alleviation of many factors that can cause social exclusion of particular groups. However, if care is not taken to ensure that "Diversity for Managers" course provision and use is tailored to the specific needs of those groups, there is a danger that it will reinforce and increase existing alienation and marginalisation.

If applied directly to the needs and interests of the target groups, it will help to alleviate some of the conditions and symptoms of social exclusion. CEOs and HR managers can aid, enhance and underpin activities taking place but in order for social exclusion to be eradicated there will need to be a far reaching strategy where a multi-disciplinary approach is developed. Within such a framework, e-Learning courses are part of the armoury to be used effectively in combating social exclusion.