

Digital public services: A threat to citizens' rights?

An insight into Belgian policies and civil society

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(TOWARDS) A DIGITAL SOCIETY

The digitalization of services means that the participation of citizens depends on the use of digital media. Inequalities can occur since not all individuals use digital media. Therefore, not all citizens have equal access to society and basic social rights could be in danger.

RESEARCH DESIGN IDEALiC

WP4

I: Belgian policymakers and digital inclusion

II: Civil society as support network: who, what, how?

Motivation

We conduct this research in order to support civil society organizations and make policy recommendations so that efficient measures can be taken.

I: POLICY ANALYSIS

260 documents from different governments and various policy domains.

Q1: To what extent is the issue of digital inclusion mentioned, and how interpreted?

Q2: Which strategies and measures are put forward with regard to digital inclusion?

II: CIVIL SOCIETY

Identification of Belgian e-inclusion actors and their competences: participative workshops with organizations and online survey.

Q1: What are the characteristics of today's digital inclusion civil society in Belgium?

Q2: What are the current challenges of these organizations?

Q3: What do they see as possible future steps in relation to digital inclusion?

State of the art of e-inclusion policies in Belgium

Europe

Aiming for economic growth, innovation and progress by digitalization. In this context, attention is paid to digital skills and accessible tools and websites.

Federal level

Digital Belgium strategy aims to strengthen Belgium's digital position, by focusing on digital skills (*Digital Belgium Skills Fund*) and infrastructure.

Regional authorities

Flanders Radical Digital Program focuses on digital interaction with citizens. Digital Wallonia plan pushes forward the economic importance of digitalization, and the Brussels government focuses on Smart City strategy and economic growth.

Additional actors

Administrative authorities, federal government services, agencies, departments, strategic advisory councils and more, as well as ministers of other policy areas also contribute significantly to the policy field.

Main findings



ABSENCE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION POLICY

There is no minister competent for digital inclusion and no transversal digital inclusion policy. All governments have their own digitalization strategy. There is a lack of coordination between policy actors. Therefore, digital inclusion is a fragmented field with mixed messages.



NO SENSE OF URGENCY

Digital inclusion often not mentioned and not a priority. In some domains it is not present, in others it's vaguely referred to. Only few resources are made available to support organizations as e-inclusion facilitators.



ALL GOVERNMENTS WANT TO DIGITIZE

Digitization of public services and internal processes is a priority. Governments want to inform and communicate with citizens, and aim for administrative simplification and efficiency.



SUPPORT INSTEAD OF PROACTIVE MEASURES

Governments aim for accessible websites and tools, but don't think about digital inclusion proactively. Civil society actors are acting as support network when problems arise afterwards.

STRICT INTERPRETATION

Different concepts are used interchangeably in policy documents, without a theoretical framework. Often there is no clear definition given. The complex interplay of digital and social criteria is rarely discussed. Instead the emphasis is on the lack of access and skills, which translates into the *one size fits all* strategy of providing access to infrastructure and support to strengthen (operational) skills.

CONCLUSION

The Belgian policy field shows an imbalance between the high degree of digitalization and the attention paid to digital inclusion. There is a need for a transversal digital inclusion strategy and coordination, with a broad understanding of the issue. This is necessary to take effective measures, but currently not the case in Belgian policies.

Civil society in Belgium

Methodology

- **Actor mapping of 1193 organizations relevant to digital inclusion**
- **Participative workshops with e-inclusion actors**
- **Online survey**

Objectives

- **Identification of the characteristics of today's digital inclusion civil society**
 - **Who takes the lead?**
 - **Who is supported?**
 - **How is digital inclusion addressed in practice?**
- **Mapping the current challenges of these organizations**
- **Mapping the possible future steps in relation to digital inclusion**

WHO SUPPORTS WHO?

- **Local organizations who assist vulnerable citizens socially**
- **Cultural institutions and libraries**
- **Specific initiatives, mainly set up by local authorities**

NOT CORE BUSINESS

- **Digital inclusion is covered as an *ad-hoc* issue, often not as a priority**
- **Organizations rarely create e-inclusion strategies**
- **Digital inclusion is not core business, but close link between social and digital challenges**

WHAT IS GOING ON?

- **Providing access, strengthening (basic) skills and assisting with digital services are priorities**
- **Tendency to support citizens more individually instead of ICT group courses**
- **Social and creative skills, and data literacy are less discussed themes.**

CITIZENS' NEEDS AND ISSUES

- **Mainly issues with digital public and private services (e-mail, e-government, internet banking, Tax-on-web)**
- **Low degree of autonomy**
- **Negative attitudes**
- **Limited home access**

Main challenges



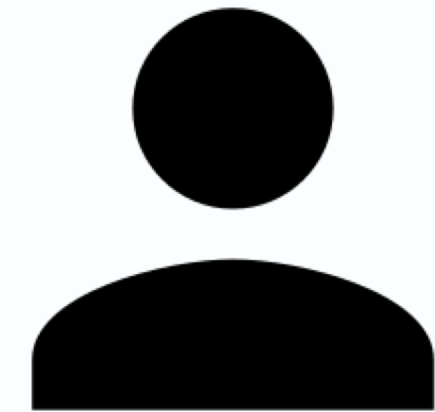
**Creating accessible
and customized
support for citizens to
better meet their
needs**



**Knowledge sharing
and cooperation**



**Lack of financial
resources and
recognition as an e-
inclusion facilitator**



**Reaching and
motivating citizens to
participate in
initiatives and
increase their
autonomy**

Future steps in relation to digital inclusion

Sense of urgency

- **On the part of policymakers**
- **Within organizations**
- **Among citizens**

Support

- **Customized support for citizens**
- **Reinforce level of (digital) autonomy**
- **Structural support for employees**

Recognition

- **More structural (financial) resources**
- **Clear vision on digital inclusion among policymakers**
- **Digital inclusion strategy in the organization itself**

Cooperation

- **Between organizations**
- **Between civil society and policymakers**
- **With citizens to identify needs and difficulties**

Broad vision

- **More than access and skills, also new trends (*digital fluidity for ex.*)**
- **Proactive thinking about digital inclusion (policymakers)**

General conclusion

RADICAL DIGITALIZATION

Decisions of governments result in practical challenges for citizens without sense of urgency for e-inclusion. There's a need for offline channels and proactive thinking when designing services.

CIVIL SOCIETY AS SAFETY NET

Social organizations provide digital support to address difficulties arising from policy decisions, but don't get supported or recognized as e-inclusion facilitators. There's a need for a clear vision on e-inclusion, more cooperation and (financial) resources to work on the issue.

FOCUS ON ACCESS AND SKILLS

New issues like data literacy, digital fluidity and autonomy in use are not covered, but are crucial elements. Citizens are supported with ad-hoc questions and ICT-courses. Instead, there's a need for individual digital assistance linked with social support, keeping in mind all social and digital barriers.

NEED FOR E- INCLUSION POLICY

There's a need for a transversal e-inclusion policy, with a good understanding of the issue beyond access and skills, and support mechanisms. In this way, policymakers can take effective measures, and civil society organizations get practical guidelines and support.

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