

Harnessing ICT for social action, a digital volunteering programme (Spain, 25 March 2014)

Using ICT for social action in Romania¹

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1. What are the current situation and the recent trends regarding digital inclusion policies in your country?

At national level, Romania has assumed the objectives of the EU Digital Agenda through a governance programme. Thus, **the Digital Agenda for the Romanian National Strategy** – which is currently in public consultation – targets directly the ICT sector aiming to contribute to economic development and increasing Romania's competitiveness through a set of key actions covering the 7 pillars of the Digital Agenda, including pillar 6: "Improving digital competences" and 7: "ICT for social challenges".

Aiming to harness the social and economic potential of ICT, the Strategy has **three main targets**: public administration, private sector (strengthening its competitiveness through ICT) and the overall population (through ensuring access to ICT resources and digital inclusion). Thus, the action area 2 of the strategy is ICT at sectorial level: education, health and culture and the action area 4 is concerned with broadband, digital services infrastructure and improving social inclusion through ensuring access to broadband ICT.

Romania has registered some **progresses** in terms of access and availability of broadband and it also ranks among the fastest internet countries in the world for real speeds. In the 2013 edition of the "State of the Internet" report made by the Akamai Company, Romania, even if the average peak connection speed declined 4.4% in the last year, still ranks first in Europe and sixth in the world after the medium internet connection speed. Given this background, Romania should be in a good position to meet the Digital Agenda for Europe target of 50% of households at 100 Mbps by 2020. The real challenge will be to meet the target of 30 Mbps for *all households* by that date. But broadband infrastructure is not sufficient to drive the knowledge economy. It is just as important to support the equipment with computers and to develop internet literacy and digital competences through training and education. ICT skills have become essential in the learning process in schools, with the development of technologies and e-learning type of products. Thus, in Romania the ICT subjects in schools are cross-cutting, ICT skills being developed and included in teaching of other subjects, and their evaluation being also done indirectly.

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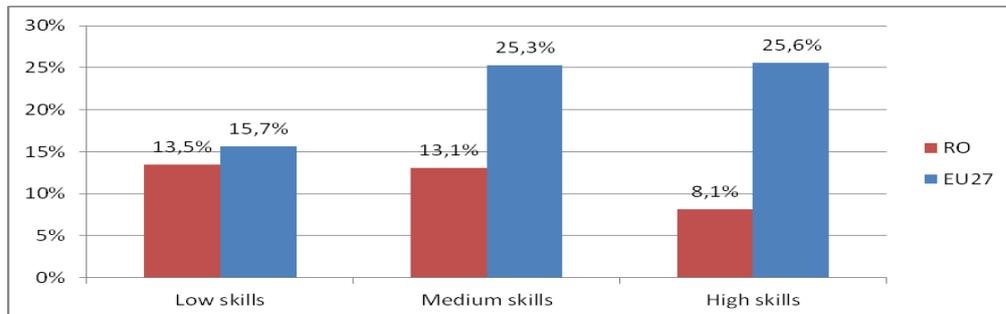
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Here are some positive trends in figures: In 2012, 43% of the population are regular internet users, an increase of 6% compared to 2011. On the other hand, 48% had never used the internet, but a significant reduction of 6% compared to 2011 shows that Romania is addressing these issues and making progress in these areas as well, though, as reported by citizens, equipment (since material deprivation is rather high in Romania) and access costs are hindering factors in accessing the internet. For example, in 2013, in rural area, only 32.8% have internet access at home, but the progress is quite remarkable, from 3% in 2007. While the level of access and internet usage increased most significantly in already developed areas and for people who have already formal education and a certain degree of internet skills.

In Romania, the most popular activities online are sending/receiving emails (38%), reading/downloading online newspapers/news (34%) and finding information on goods and services (31%). Especially low use is reported in 2012 for internet banking, internet use for travel and accommodation services as well as for online sales, suggesting very low levels of trust related to online financial transactions.

In terms of **digital competence/ICT skills**, in 2012, 35% of citizens had some level of computer skills.



Computer skills, 2012 Source: Eurostat

- How is the **reporting** on national digital inclusion policies, its **implementation** and **target areas** organised?

The **key players in digital inclusion policy** are the Ministry of Communications and Information Society (MCIS), the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (NAMRC) and the Ministry of National Education (MNE).

MCIS is responsible for setting goals and developing the strategic vision for the ICT sector, while NAMRC is the independent regulator of the telecommunication sector, with the primary responsibility of developing competition in the sector and MNE is responsible for ICT education in schools.

In 2009, the Government issued the Decision no. 444/2009 on the *Government Strategy for the development of broadband electronic communications in Romania for the period 2009-2015*. This strategy aims at providing wide access to information technologies for the whole society by creating conditions for developing a competitive market and to provide public support in disadvantaged areas, to promote Romania as an important region for e-business services and to encourage the development of relevant content for Romanian users. It had a positive evaluation and became a best practice: *"Romania's broadband strategy provides a good example of the challenges policy-makers are facing in countries where fixed network infrastructure is less developed. In such countries, The Romanian approach shows how these challenges can be addressed, i.e. by creating a broad government-led collaboration supported by the private sector through PPPs and*



funded through a mixture of public and private investment, including direct EU funding. The combination of strategic vision (articulated by the Government), operational knowledge (provided by the operators) and financial support (from the EU) provides a replicable model for policy-makers elsewhere." (Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2012:20)

In the area of education, the strategic development lines are: ensuring ICT infrastructure in schools, developing ICT skills of pupils, students and teachers using ICT in the learning process (OER – *Open Educational Resources*, Web 2.0 tools) and in lifelong learning, ensuring e-inclusion through developing e-skills.

There were several representative projects for Romania, among which the "**Knowledge-Based Economy Project (KEP)**", implemented between 2006 and 2013 by MCIS and focusing on reducing the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of digital access and literacy, which targeted 255 rural disadvantaged communities (representing 44% of Romania's total number of disadvantaged communities according to the World Bank's evaluation report) and 1.8 million people through implementing local electronic networks which serve as knowledge centres, offer information and services to local authorities, schools, libraries, citizens and SMEs.

Its objectives were:

- Facilitating access to ICT for disadvantaged communities and people, access to knowledge, equipment and connectivity and also digital literacy;
- Increasing the delivery quality of the educational process through integrating ICT in teaching, increasing the use of ICT and developing ICT culture among teachers and pupils;
- Improving access to ICT through Local Communities Electronic Networks (LCEN).

Within this project, in 2012, the "Technical assistance for using ICT in schools and libraries" component was implemented in 229 marginalised rural localities and small cities aiming to deliver management instruments for the LCEN personnel and to develop activities to increase the communities' capacity to develop partnerships, projects and sustainable initiatives.

The monitoring and evaluation process of the KEP project was done through external evaluators who drafted semester and annual progress reports based on reports from project management units, local authorities, questionnaires and research.

The project was considered in the World Bank evaluation report as highly relevant to the current development priorities. The project is fully supporting the National Reform Strategy, the EU's Europe 2020 strategy and Digital Agenda. The KEP is also aligned to the current Country Partnership Strategy FY09-FY13 and Progress Report that supports Romania's convergence with the EU, in particular to increasing the participation of disadvantaged communities in the knowledge based society and towards implementing the goals of the EU 2020 strategy.

The KEP received many distinctions and prizes: Medal at the e-Inclusion Competition organised by the European Commission, in the section "Geographic Inclusion" in 2008; 1st Prize at the National Competition of Best Practices in Public Administration for "Improving public services through quality management and organisational performance" in 2010; Laureate of the Computer World Honours Programme in 2011; Certification of Good Practice at the 2011 "European Public Sector Awards" (EPSA) within the European Institution of Public Administration.

Another notable initiative in the field of digital inclusion is the "**IT-Based Educational System (SEI)**" implemented by the Ministry of National Education.



Since 2001, it has been integrated as a key component in the reform of education. The project focuses on digital literacy of the young population, the adoption of technology in education, as well as ICT support for teaching/learning management activities. The main results of the *IT-Based Educational System (SEI)* were:

- 7 million users and stakeholders implied in the project: students, teachers, administrative personnel, parents, decision makers, specialists in education;
- 15,000 IT laboratories;
- over 2,000 schools connected to Internet;
- 192,000 desktops and laptops provided in schools;
- 3,700 learning units, over 16,000 reusable learning objects (RLO's);
- SEI Educational Portal (<http://portal.edu.ro>) – 130,000 registered users, over 1,000,000 messages;
- 369 specialised IT and AeL trainers certificated (2004-2008).

Other projects of MCIS aiming at a better digital inclusion were: **"Public areas with free internet access"** – creating 11 hotspots in 2009, **"Increasing access to internet services"** – extending the number of hotspots to 200, **"RO-NET – creating national broadband infrastructure in disadvantaged areas using structural funds"**.

- Which **data** that links digital inclusion initiatives to social inclusion are collected?

The majority of the programmes implemented are carefully monitored. For example, the monitoring and evaluation process of the KEP project was done through external evaluators who drafted semester and annual progress reports based on reports from project management units, local authorities, questionnaires and research. There was a set of indicators, based on which relevant data were collected. The impact indicators were:

- Communities without internet access;
- Satisfaction regarding the results of the project and ICT use;
- Internet usage frequency;
- Official documents upload/download;
- Cooperation between communities/participation in projects.

2. What are the most important tangible social outcome areas for digital inclusion policies?

The most important social outcomes of digital inclusion policies are:

- Decreased social exclusion of disadvantaged communities;
- Increased social cohesion and social networking;
- Availability of intelligent public services for sustainable economic growth;
- Developed human resources skills through education and training;
- Reduced digital gaps between regions, groups, people;
- New and convenient electronic public services;
- Better access to public services and reduced bureaucracy;
- Access to communication services throughout the country;
- Awareness raised and trust gained in ICT as a useful tool;
- Better employment opportunities;
- Increased competitiveness on the labour market, better social inclusion;



- Better access to information and culture;
- A more friendly assisted living environment for elderly and disabled;
- Better quality of life.

There are great benefits to consumers of having access to ICT infrastructure. Those people who do not enjoy such access are in a significant disadvantage in terms of their access to information, services and jobs.

- **How are ICT awareness, motivation and engagement supported in relation to specific social outcomes in national policies?**

The implementation of the measures aiming at digital and socio-economic inclusion is planned to be in an integrated manner including:

- Raising awareness on social exclusion;
- Raising awareness on existing support for e-inclusion;
- Developing digital skills and internet usage at all levels;
- Promoting the "learning together" practice;
- Involving human resources departments in companies and public institutions for ICT training provision for employees.

ICT awareness, motivation and engagement is supported through the organisation of campaigns regarding the benefits of ICT and internet use and the digital inclusion measures provided, round tables, workshops, seminars.

Thus, the project of **the Digital Agenda for the Romanian National Strategy** had been widely promoted and disseminated through a roadshow strategy with roundtables, presentations, workshops, press conferences. These meetings aimed at awareness raising regarding the importance of ICT and the EU Digital agenda and also aimed at bringing together all stakeholders in order to develop practical ideas and concrete proposals for the implementation of the strategy at local level based on local needs, identifying potential public-private partnerships for developing intelligent regional platforms for public services delivery, indentifying action plans for each pillar.

For supporting ICT awareness raising, motivation and engagement, there were also initiatives like: promoting ECDL training within public institutions at all levels of administration.

In order to motivate and engage children to use ICT there are several tools: supporting extracurricular networking activities, experience exchanges, school camps, e-holiday, social networks and also the above mentioned ones (Web 2.0 etc.) which are very attractive for pupils. Taken into account that there are many poor and disadvantaged children in Romania, the Ministry of National Education conducted a programme called "Euro 200", on the legal basis of the Law no. 269/2004 on granting a financial aid for stimulating computer acquisition according to social criteria. At 31 May 2003 the number of beneficiaries was 21,077 pupils with a maximum monthly income per family member of 76.40 RON (17 EURO).

What has been done to stimulate multi-sector partnerships in relation to digital inclusion? What are the barriers?

The Romanian government is the actor with the greatest degree of responsibility in the implementation of e-inclusion policies, but partnerships with other bodies are essential.



Since 2012 there is a working group on digital inclusion in Romania, named "**Digital Alliance for Romania**" consisting of public institutions, private companies and NGOs aiming at promoting digital inclusion initiatives in Romania, such as: "**Get online 2012**", a digital inclusion awareness campaign for the increasing importance of the ICT skills in today's society and especially on the labour market; **Biblionet** – a 5-year programme to create a system of modern public libraries all over the country, which offer access to modern computers and Internet and the librarians are trained to efficiently answer to any requests of the users; **The e-Skills Week campaign** – at the first edition in 2010, Romania won the prize for entrepreneurship and digital skills for the project *Green Cell Charger* of two students from Iași county.

The ambiguous legislation on public-private partnerships, which leaves room for interpretation, is one of the main barriers in closing such partnerships and thus affecting private investments in this area. The private sector proposed the simplification of procedures and easier access to necessary information in the area.

3. Which target populations should be emphasised in digital inclusion policies that aim to tackle the social challenges as identified for example by the Europe2020 strategy and the Social Investment Package?

The specialised literature indicates that social groups more exposed to digital exclusion are the typical excluded categories: those from rural areas or from marginalised communities, elderly people, persons with low educational level, disabled people, the unemployed or inactive people.

The *residential area* is a very important factor of digital vulnerability. In rural area, only 32.8% had internet access at home in 2013, but the progress is quite remarkable, from 3% in 2007.

Gender is not a difference factor, the disparity in internet usage according to gender is small, only 3%: 47% men and 44% women are regular internet users; 52% internet users are men and 48% women.

Age is an important feature for disparities: 7% compared to the EU average of 34% of people aged 65-74 are using internet.

Being *retired or inactive* is also a disadvantage: 21% compared to the EU average of 48% are regular internet users.

Formal education is the main factor of polarisation in digital competences: only 20% of individuals with low formal education compared to the EU average of 48% are using internet regularly. On the other hand, 93% of those with high formal education use internet regularly (similar to the EU average); this value is higher than in the majority of newly admitted members or former socialist countries.

As a result, we can say that in Romania the digital competences are highly polarised: a very small part of high-quality skilled individuals, at the same level with the further developed countries in the EU and a very poor skilled mass population, with a gap compared to the EU level.

Besides the low income, two **factors** are **responsible for digital exclusion**, the same factors responsible for social exclusion in general: the lack of infrastructure and accessibility, especially in rural areas or remote areas and the lack of education or poor education, especially in modern and technological abilities. This IT literacy gap and the territorial gap are the main targets of the digital inclusion policy.



In conclusion, Romania's policy should focus on territorial disparities, particularly urban/rural and isolated areas, and on large programmes of digital literacy.

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