



European  
Commission



Peer Review  
in Social Protection  
and Social Inclusion

## Harnessing ICT for social action - a digital volunteering programme

**SHORT REPORT**

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*Social Europe*

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Santiago de Compostela (Spain) was the venue for this Peer Review, which was hosted on 25 March 2014 by the Galician Regional Ministry of Employment and Social Welfare. In addition to the host country, seven peer countries were represented: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The stakeholder representative was AGE Platform Europe. Taking part for the European Commission were representatives of the Joint Research Centre and of the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

## 1. The policy under review

ICT is a major driving force for knowledge, participation and jobs – but its rapid development has left some people behind. This gap perpetuates old forms of social disadvantage and creates new ones. To tackle the problem, the Galician region of Spain has devised an innovative **Digital Volunteering Programme**. Launched in January 2012, it channels various forms of voluntary participation in order to combat digital and social exclusion. This volunteering programme complements the Galician authorities' effort to build an Information Society for all.

In predominantly rural Galicia, digital inclusion still has some way to go. In 2012, 57.4% of the Galician population as a whole used the Internet regularly, compared with 69.8% across Spain and 73.0% in the EU27. For disadvantaged groups, the corresponding figures were 29.4% in Galicia, 44.9% in Spain and 59.9% in the EU27. The European Union's target is for 75% of the EU population, and 60% of disadvantaged people, to have regular Internet access by 2015.

Galicia's Digital Volunteering Programme (Galician acronym: VOLDIX) uses volunteers from NGOs, the service and commercial sectors and educational establishments and also benefits from corporate social responsibility initiatives. The programme has **six main target groups: older people, disabled people, parents, prison inmates, rural women and unemployed people**.

It aims to promote:

- **digital literacy and inclusion;**
- **research and innovation in social technology**, especially as it relates to health, well-being and active ageing;
- **employment** in the new digital professions;
- **social innovation**.

Appropriately enough, would-be helpers offer their services online, via the **VOLDIX portal** at <https://voluntariadodixital.xunta.es>. Once they have registered, they can access a password-protected section where voluntary action bodies indicate their current needs. By clicking a button, volunteers can show their interest in a particular opportunity. The VOLDIX Coordination Unit and the voluntary body concerned then select the most appropriate volunteers. The portal also lists training courses and online events.

## 2. Key issues discussed during the meeting

**Reporting, implementation and targeting** were among the main issues discussed in relation to the Galician policy and those of the peer countries. A particular concern here is the **collection of data** linking digital inclusion initiatives to improvements in social inclusion. What are the most **tangible social outcomes**? As regards the **target populations**, links to the social challenges identified in the EU's **Europe 2020**

strategy<sup>1</sup> and in the **Social Investment Package**<sup>2</sup> were emphasised. The Peer Review also examined how best to encourage **multi-stakeholder partnerships for digital inclusion**.

### 3. Key learning elements

#### Main facts and challenges

- There are significant **inequalities** in Europe in terms of digital inclusion. It varies according to **gender, age, household composition** and **socio-economic status**. In many cases, **compound exclusion** is involved – the same people suffer a number of disadvantages, which have to be tackled together.
- **Low education** and **unemployment** are particularly strong indicators for digital exclusion.
- **Digital exclusion will not be overcome quickly**. The self-evaluated ICT skills of people in disadvantaged groups have scarcely improved at all in recent years, due to changes in the digital landscape. Also, social exclusion has become firmly entrenched in the groups concerned. Research in Sweden and the UK shows that the most reasons people gave for not going online in 2005 were still mentioned by about the same percentage in 2011. This includes financial reasons, even though the cost of going online has significantly decreased. But whereas in 2005, only 50% of those offline said it was because they were simply not interested, the same response is now given by almost 90% of those who are not online. This suggests that it has become harder to involve those who are digitally excluded.
- A growing number of **private and public services are available only online**. This implies even greater social exclusion of people who do not have Internet access.
- **The focus must be on the engagement of the end user, not on access or infrastructure**. The criterion is social need. The technology must be brought to the people, rather than the other way round. Contextualisation and localisation of initiatives can help to overcome barriers. For instance, a formal, classroom style of ICT training course may suit some groups but be intimidating for others.

#### Implementation, evaluation and sustainability

- There is **no “one size fits all” solution** to digital exclusion. Varying approaches are to be welcomed, but there must also be an effort to assess what works and what does not. This entails open **sharing both of “best practice” and of “worst practice” examples**. The European Commission encourages frankness about the success or otherwise of supported projects and to share the lessons learned.
- It is important to clearly distinguish between the evaluation of implementation and impact. The **tangible outcomes** that need to be evaluated **are social** and not (only) digital outcomes.
- The **cost-effectiveness** of digital inclusion interventions must be clearly established if politicians are to be convinced to invest in them. In particular, experimental schemes cannot be so expensive that there is no realistic prospect of scaling them up.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1044&>

- For economic and business reasons, **some governments are focussing on providing faster Internet connections, rather than on broadening access.** This could further exacerbate inequalities.
- The mid-long term **sustainability** of initiatives is equally important. This applies to their human resources as well as to their funding. In particular, volunteer projects may suffer from waning enthusiasm over time. Longer-term planning of such projects is needed.

#### Stakeholder involvement and volunteering

- **Corporate involvement** in digital inclusion initiatives is an important element of the **multi-stakeholder** approach. Firms can see it as a form of corporate social responsibility, but there is also a **business case** to be made. Widespread digital skills can simplify both work processes and access to markets, thus reducing costs.
- Initiatives based on volunteering may tend to concentrate on **“low-hanging fruit”** – in other words, the forms of exclusion that are easier and more attractive to tackle may take precedence over the harder cases.

#### Lifelong learning

- **Lifelong learning** is directly relevant to digital inclusion, as the skills required will continue to change.
- **Older people** are statistically less likely to start accessing the Internet for the first time. However, once they have been online, they are no more likely to abandon Internet use than are other age groups.

#### Coordination and governance

- More **coordination** between different volunteer and charity sectors and government initiatives linked to an **overarching strategy** is a key factor.
- **Within government, digital inclusion is a cross-cutting issue** that potentially involves many different departments. Should the policy responsibility be shared, or should there be a ministry for ICT? This issue was flagged up for further discussion.
- There may be a case for establishing **EU digital access rights**, along the lines of the current EU-wide passengers' rights.

## 4. Contribution of the Peer Review to Europe 2020

The **Europe 2020** strategy aims to “turn the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion”. One of the flagship initiatives within that strategy is the **Digital Agenda for Europe**<sup>3</sup> (DAE). Of its objectives, the three most important for digital inclusion are

- **fast and ultra-fast Internet access;**
- **enhancing digital literacy skills and inclusion;**
- **ICT-enabled benefits for EU society.**

In that context, the 2011 Gdansk Roadmap for Digital Inclusion looked in particular at awareness-raising, funding, digital literacy, knowledge hubs and the development and promotion of common tools for digital inclusion across the EU.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/>

Through an exchange of views on practical examples in a number of countries, the Peer Review in Santiago de Compostela moved that process forward.

The Peer Review also discussed a number of **other flagship Europe 2020 initiatives that can contribute to digital inclusion**, notably:

- The **Innovation Union** to improve framework conditions and access to finance for research and innovation.
- The **Youth on the Move** initiative to enhance the performance of education systems and facilitate young people's entry into the labour market.
- The **Agenda for New Skills and Jobs** to modernise labour markets and empower people by developing their skills throughout life.
- The **European Platform Against Poverty** to ensure social and territorial cohesion.

The EU's **Social Investment Package** places strong emphasis on social innovation, and digital inclusion is an important part of this. The package is supported by a project on **ICT-enabled social innovation**. The Peer Review heard the objectives of this project, which aims at providing a further understanding about how ICT based social innovation can support the implementation of policies promoting social investment. In particular, the researchers will be mapping existing policy experiences; proposing frameworks for evaluating the concrete outcomes of various interventions that make use of ICT, including digital inclusion, to promote social investment; and analyse those outcomes. The Peer Reviewers generally agreed that methodologies and data have so far been lacking in this field.