

6 Social Inclusion

6.1 Domain Description

The advent of the Information Society and new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) that are associated with it has often been heralded as an extremely positive development that should in principle benefit all members of society. It is now well accepted that the spread and usage patterns of ICT tools has been uneven, with many European citizens still lacking an easy access to them, and crucially and result ing out of this, are having a differential proximity to, and level of engagement with this information society. In other words, it can be claimed that, just like with any other major social change, the arrival of the information society, apart from bringing undisputed and numerous benefits, at the same time brings threats to many and highlights their vulnerability to handle, let alone benefit from this change. This comparability with other social changes is largely behind the reasons for approaching the topic of digital inclusion from the broad-spectrum point of social inclusion and has led to it being considered and analysed from a similar vantage point and perspectives. However, it has to be emphasised that although broadly the same individuals and groups that are at risk from social exclusion in general are just as likely to be excluded from the information society, there are some unique characteristics of this new divide that merit a separate and an in-depth research enquiry.

Although the initial enthusiasm regarding the advent of the information society has receded somewhat, its potential to decrease marginalisation and, at the same time, to empower people to participate more in a wider society is still an appealing and indeed a laudable concept. However, before the policy makers and indeed wider society can fully endorse this concept and approach, it is important to fully appreciate how widely and indeed effectively the ICT tools have been used.

6.2 Description of major problems and gaps in statistical coverage

The rationale for providing this enquiry outlined above with an additional set of indicators cannot be overstated and is reinforced by the fact that this new socio-economic cleavage, referred to as a *digital divide*, is not well quantified nor are its implications, dare one suggest, fully understood and appreciated. Therefore, the aims of the project in this area are twofold - seeking to compile and formulate these indicators, as well as to contribute towards a better theoretical conceptualisation of the whole area of digital inclusion, mainly by providing a coherent framework for the subsequent development of the indicators aimed at capturing this topic.

SIBIS believes that the best way to achieve this is by fragmenting the topic into several sub-topics and then highlighting the issues related to these sub-topics. It is contended that this approach should facilitate a better comprehension of the indicators designed and used to encapsulate this topic and provide a basis for benchmarking. SIBIS research into this topic report presents, on the one hand, the results of a thorough examination of relevant policy documents which seeks to decipher contemporary perspectives on the topic. On the other, it represents a stocktaking exercise of existing indicators that are (or can be) used for capturing and quantifying this topic, in a way that is consistent with identification of pathways for innovative indicator generation. It therefore relates in many ways to the demand of the European policy makers for better, primarily quantitative indicators conducive for policy evaluation, valuable for supporting the policy making and, crucially, suitable for benchmarking. The stocktaking effort and subsequent analysis thereof has indicated that there is a dearth of both focused research on the topic, and of suitable indicators, and this was particularly the case for Europe. Furthermore, many pieces of researches were conducted only once in several years, or they were one-off exercises without much prospect of being replicated in a way that would generate longitudinal data¹. At the same time, the data

¹ With the exception of the US based research on the topic (Falling Through the Net series), which further reinforces the need for comparable research in the EU context

was not gathered simultaneously, with due regard to comparability and needs for benchmarking that can be clearly set in a certain point in time. These types of data are increasingly becoming indispensable policy tools, at least in terms of policy evaluation and progression.

SIBIS divides the topic into three subtopics that are deemed conducive for indicator generation and typology. The most obvious way to examine whether the new digital divide coincides with or cuts across the existing lines of social exclusion appears to be to examine the proximity to the information society of the individuals and groups that have traditionally been most vulnerable [i.e. susceptible to general social exclusion]. This reasoning was behind the first subtopic - identifying individuals and groups 'at risk' or relatively more likely to be excluded (it is this area that highlighted many common themes between so-called "classical" social inclusion and e-inclusion). The second subtopic focused on the whole area of access issues, with access defined in a broad sense to include not just a physical access but also issues such as awareness of (and benefits of) access, accessibility and user friendliness of the Internet, skill possession and affordability of access to ICTs, mainly conceptualised as the Internet. Finally, it was also endeavoured to examine the issues behind the rationale for participation (in the information society) such as sustainability of participation, with references to both individual and community level participation.

From the relevant conceptual point of view, the emphasis is on identifying and capturing the (relative) gap in individuals' and groups' proximity to the information society.

6.3 New indicators overview

While the need for new indicators in this area is enormous, direct indicator development in SIBIS has been to a large extent led by methodological requirements (and budgetary constraints) focusing thus on those indicators for which data can be collected at a single point in time via telephone-based interview surveys, being the main data generating vehicle of the project. Furthermore, the indicators that can be gathered via 'omnibus' type of a survey, being the main research instrument available to the project, have been prioritised. In this vein, and following further the project's methodological approach, a distinction is made regarding the indicators (operationalised as variables and / or survey questions) that will relate to a general population survey (GPS) and those to be piloted in a survey targeted at the decision makers in companies/establishments (DMS). In summary, two issues above were crucial for indicator generation and selection process (in addition, of course to the topic and its associated perspectives) and subtopic relevance:

- *policy relevance*: whether indicators that are / will be relevant for [EC] policy making purposes, in particular for eEurope action lines, and for better understanding of the Information Society in the EU in general, and
- *Efficiency and feasibility*: apart from the cost-benefit assessment (i.e. benefits of including certain variables in surveys and usefulness of indicators that can be generated from them). Another issue had to be recognised, mainly that not all indicators and not all topics lend themselves to (telephone) survey research. However, it has to be added that there remains a considerable potential for creating some innovative composite indicators by combining the SIBIS indicators with indicators from other sources, where appropriate.

This brings us to the issue of the potential of SIBIS to both benefit from (and at the same time to contribute to) the indicators developed and to be developed in this area (of social inclusion and the information society). This is another part of the process of indicator generation and this potential can be realised by building the compound or composite indicators out of individual items that can be meaningfully amalgamated together. In addition, there are some indicators that can be at this stage only suggested for uptake by other researchers. This two pronged approach to the indicator generation process is necessary given the nature of the topic itself, which has traditionally being the most difficult to capture methodologically.

The table below lists the main topic and subtopic areas for which indicators have been developed, together with a selection of indicators which are being piloted in SIBIS (inclusive of indicators being suggested for uptake), forming so called *level one* indicators.

Thematic Domain	Sub-domain	Selected new level 1 indicators	Piloting in SIBIS
Social Inclusion and the Information Society	Identifying vulnerable/'at risk' groups and individuals ²	ÿ Use of ICTs by 'traditionally' disadvantaged groups in society (using various socio-demographic variables)	SIBIS GPS
		ÿ Regional disparities in use of ICTs (e.g. ICTs in localities of different size bands)	SIBIS GPS
		ÿ Usage of ICTs by ethnic minority groups	—
	Access -- nominal / physical access	ÿ Differential levels of access in terms of speed (broadband/narrowband)	SIBIS GPS
		ÿ Individual perceptions regarding the access possibilities for using the Internet	SIBIS GPS
	Access – skills required	ÿ Individual perceptions regarding the level of skills required for using the Internet	SIBIS GPS
		ÿ Ability to source information on the Internet	SIBIS GPS
		ÿ Ability to utilise Internet-based/ associated modes of communication	SIBIS GPS
	Access – accessibility (of the Internet), as prioritised in relevant eEurope action lines	ÿ Corporate website accessibility for people with disabilities /special needs	SIBIS DMS
		ÿ Corporate website adaptability to special needs/user requirements	SIBIS DMS
		ÿ Corporate website being developed with regard to Web Accessibility Initiative	SIBIS DMS
	Access – awareness / skills	ÿ Perceptions regarding the ease of access to the Internet	SIBIS GPS
		ÿ Usage of PIAPs/free Internet access points	SIBIS GPS
	Access - affordability	ÿ Perceptions regarding affordability of Internet access at home	SIBIS GPS
	Rationale for participation in IS	ÿ The spread of virtual communities/civic networks	—
Perceived benefits of participation	ÿ Perceptions regarding usefulness of the Internet for an individual	SIBIS GPS	
Sustainability of participation in IS	ÿ Share of Internet drop-outs (persons who used to have Internet access at home)	SIBIS GPS	
	ÿ Assessment of detrimental impact of not having access to the Internet on individual's perception regarding social enfranchisement	SIBIS GPS	
	ÿ Ability to provide information about self over the Internet via creating personal webpage	SIBIS GPS	
	ÿ Degree of Internet-based networking amongst friends and relatives	SIBIS GPS	
	ÿ Diffusion of the Internet in voluntary/NGO sector	—	

² Although broadly similar to classic indicators aimed at identifying the individuals and groups at risk of traditional exclusion, these indicators are nevertheless necessary to fully examine the digital dividing lines.