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Empowerment for vulnerable people through 'digital social innovation'

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www.si-drive.eu

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the discussion outcomes of the session “Empowerment for vulnerable people through ‘digital social innovation’” during the conference “Social Innovation 2015. Pathways to Social Change”, 18th-19th November 2015, Vienna. The session dealt with a triple intersection: It asked for social innovations empowering vulnerable people and focused on those social innovations which are either “supported” or “enabled” (Millard/Carpenter 2014) by digital technology (“digital social innovations” DSI, Bria 2014). The notion of “Social Innovation” is based on the understanding of Howaldt/Schwarz (2010) as “new social practices”, trying to solve problems in a better way than existing practices. The notion of “vulnerable people” refers to those hindered from meaningful participation in various social fields, like employment, education or health by the social and technological environment. The session focused on the question of the ability of social innovation to support or enable vulnerable people by digital means and which aspects of vulnerability could be addressed by digital social innovation in particular.

The aim of the workshop was to develop an agenda for empowerment for vulnerable people through digital social innovation (DSI). This agenda has a twofold objective. (1) It addresses policy-makers in order to highlight both the potential of DSI for empowering vulnerable people and the research gaps in the field. It links the opportunities of multi-stakeholder social innovation models and the roles ICT can play and depicts the need to promote and support research on “empowerment through DSI” from an integrated perspective. (2) The agenda also addresses scientists themselves. It encourages them to tackle the topic and establish a new research focus on this upcoming hot topic.

The research agenda is built upon theses and open questions the invited workshop experts brought to the discussion. In order to gain a sufficiently comprehensive picture, the workshop brought together inputs from third sector organisations, the business sector, research & education as well as a policy perspective. The agenda was complemented by comments made by the audience. The workshop outcomes are grouped in four thematic strands. Each combines theses and central research questions and objectives.

1. Theses and Research Agenda

1.1. *The role of digital social innovation for inclusion*

1. Digital social innovation (DSI) can be a powerful tool when used for and by vulnerable people (e.g. overcoming otherwise limited access, reach and participation) but can also further marginalise them if not made affordable, easy and purposeful (e.g. if the digital divide reinforces rather than ameliorates existing socio-economic divides).
2. The megatrends of mediatisation and inclusive education can complement each other and have the power to lead to more empowerment. This process must be facilitated by adequate means. Policy makers are requested to provide the framework for the development of pedagogical support.
3. The majority of successful DSI uses technology alongside traditional activities in support of vulnerable people, such as physical face-to-face activities through co-creation, cooperation, socialising, meetings and other activities, as well as with mass and print media. In such situations, ICT can create or support social and economic competencies and relationships leading to the greatest SI impact. Where technology is used standalone, it can be beneficially transformative as long as it is not used to exploit or impose solutions on the vulnerable. But technology alone can not address needs of vulnerable people; research and policy are requested to provide blended services that exploit the added value of DSI while not forgetting the needs of people that can only be addressed by face to face services in “real” environments.
4. DSI can also be used by civil society, public organisations as well as companies to provide better services, support and job opportunities that meet the social needs of vulnerable people through precise personalisation to individual needs, given that most vulnerable people suffer from a unique and highly complex multi-dimensional set of challenges. Empirical research can identify and describe multi-actor collaborations and underlying typologies which help to meet such goals.
5. DSI policy and regulation should focus mainly on four strategies:
 - a. first, encouraging good social outcomes rather than prescribing how to achieve them (as the latter would stifle innovation);
 - b. second, ensuring basic social and economic protections so exploitation of the vulnerable does not take place;
 - c. third, interventions that are preventative and empowering rather than remedial
 - d. and fourth, introducing co-creation of solutions together with vulnerable people and/or their stakeholders as a mainstream approach of DSI policy and regulation.
6. In order to ameliorate social protection systems by means of DSI, policy design and research need to analyse carefully the size/outreach of planned interventions (local, regional, national) as well as the conditions for scaling-up, replicability and long-term sustainability.
7. The modernisation of EU social protection systems - which is key to address the needs of disadvantaged groups in society - requires a combination of ICTs and non-ICT enabled innovations, so that the potential (enabling or game-changing) capabilities of ICTs are fully tapped.

1.2. Collaboration, contexts and intermediaries

8. SI development depends on local contexts, especially local partnerships, and participants! Networking capacities of actors are important, but not always well developed and could be improved, especially for small intermediary organisations. Based on empirical data, research can shed a light on how local innovation examples in general and DSI-driven empowerment solutions in particular can be scaled up, replicated and made sustainable.
9. What is innovative or not is depending on participants' (NOT beneficiaries) profiles (e.g. elderly, NEETs, migrants, etc) and their needs. DSI increases when recipients are givers as well (e.g. youth or migrants providing digital training to adults, seniors mentoring youth, domiciliary carers facilitating seniors' use of internet, etc). Therefore, the process of co-creation between different actors is an important driver for developing digital social innovations. But how are the vulnerable groups accessed? Intermediation of other partners is necessary which work on behalf of the beneficiaries (partnerships with intermediaries). What are the methods/competences needed for co-creation? The matching of differences is key to what DSI should bring about.
10. The role of internet companies in supporting DSI remains unclear. One role of intermediaries is to create and facilitate cross-sectoral DSI initiatives internet companies can contribute to.
11. The private sector has not to be overlooked while considering digital solutions for inclusive purposes. Companies can act not just as donors but as co-partners, designing accessible solutions boosting social transformations.
12. Encouraging collaboration between the public sector and private organisations, including social enterprises, for the delivery of public services, and promoting the creation of an ecosystem where the private sector can thrive, is certainly instrumental to take advantage of ICT-enabled social innovation.
13. e-Inclusion intermediary organisations operating at grassroots level (telecentres, ICT community centres, etc) are digital social innovators but not always aware of their own potential. Structured exchange and collaboration with researchers, policy makers and ICT producers might increase it.
14. Matching the needs of civil society and vulnerable people with the operational processes of private companies is key: co-creation methods, impact metrics and issues related to the governance of funds have to be harmonized towards a common vision for implementing innovative and inclusive digital solutions.
15. How can single actors find/identify participants? Creating organisations or delivering the necessary tools that local organisations can start working in the field.
16. The role of Intermediaries is crucial in collaborative processes, but research results are scarce. Which kinds of intermediaries can support the empowerment of vulnerable target groups through DSI? Inhowfar can social innovation intermediaries (SI labs, centres, etc.) and/or inclusion intermediaries (telecentres, libraries, etc.) play a role? And what can these different types of intermediaries learn from each other?
17. Digital content needs to be affordable, as digital content's accessibility is key for all stakeholders". Digital commons should be supported and promoted.
18. Government action towards accessibility and universal design is required to support research and industry through clear guidelines maximizing firms' specific potential.
19. Cloud-based services with mobiles offer vast opportunities for participation and empowerment.

20. Intergenerational learning is one method in digital learning.
21. The full exploitation of digital technology options by people with disabilities and older people needs user oriented standards and solutions in compliance with those. Mobile, cloud based digital services will empower people with disabilities and older people and provide completely new freedom.
22. No/ only a few digital technology standards for accessibility and usability are created. More standards need to be created and enforced. Accessibility for websites has to be improved. Standards for diverse user groups of accessibility are not followed. Policy needs to make sure that user needs are integrated by user co-construction of solutions. "Nothing about us, without us" needs to be made a transversal approach.

1.3. Research and participation

23. Research is needed to understand the role of digital communication as a driver of socially inclusive impacts. Participatory and inclusive research might be the foundation for co-creation and "co-partnering" and co-designing. This paves the way for a new way of understanding communication which is a core of social innovation. The connection of user centred design and research with inclusive participatory research can empower vulnerable people.
24. There needs to be a shift from beneficiary to participant. Mainstream thinking is a barrier, looking for new ways of helping.
25. Research leading into practice needs to better understand what ICT technology, on the one hand, and people, on the other, do best and in which contexts they do best, as well as how these configurations are changing.
26. More research is needed to identify DSI experiments and interventions that succeed to enable bottom-up political participation and community empowerment processes, and to identify under which conditions these programmes are successful.

1.4. Impact measurement

27. The lack of evidence from scientific evaluation of ICT-enabled social innovation interventions hamper the possibility to prove an initiative successful and thus facilitate scalability, replicability or transferability of practices and policies through demonstrating the effects produced and the factors affecting impacts.
28. There is a need to establish the practice of impact evaluation/measurement in the field of digital social innovation, so to assess outcomes and impact of interventions on specific target groups, and to better understand the 'multiplying/amplifying' role of ICTs.

2. Conclusion

The authors grouped the workshop results into four thematic strands. These are assembling postulations, requests and suggestions for policy makers, researchers, enterprises and civil society actors.

- The first strand focuses on the role of DSI for inclusion. It provides an overarching perspective and addresses all three underlying thematic areas of the topic, all highly relevant research fields of their own, which are (a) empowerment for and by vulnerable people, (b) digitalisation of society and the corresponding need for digital inclusion, and (c) social innovation as problem-solving through new social practices. While the presenters in the Vienna session as well as large parts of the audience were experts in one or two of these areas – e.g. in empowerment through technology as an intersection of a/b, or digital social innovation as an intersection of b/c – the triangle of all three topics spans a research field which is currently emerging and which will receive substantial attention in the future. We suggest that blending those three perspectives could be fruitful for research as well as for the development of social innovation.
- The second strand reflects collaboration models and the challenge of intermediaries development. Questions of actor constellations and cross-sector collaboration have been investigated in the traditional innovation studies already. The triple-helix model of academic-industry-government relations has been expanded in order to include civil society as the fourth sector especially, but not exclusively in social innovation processes. Since the way in which such different actors can jointly work towards a common goal depends very much on the thematic context, empowerment through digital social innovation being a case of its own. The same goes for intermediaries development, an emerging topic in social innovation research, which is here confronted with a tradition of inclusion intermediaries such as telecentres already in place.
- The third strand addresses the potential of participatory research in the field. The role of researchers in social innovation processes is discussed controversially, asking once more in how far scientific knowledge production in the field differs or should differ from traditional science. The agenda suggests to critically take stock of different approaches and methods available for studying the topic.
- A final strand highlights the need for better impact measurement in ICT-enabled social innovation, asking for suitable measurement criteria and methodologies as well as a regular and reliable practice of impact evaluation/measurement to be established.

Seeing the actors mentioned during the workshop debate from a bird's eye perspective, one actor group seems to be missing: traditional welfare institutions are rarely considered in the context of social innovation. While policy and research (and the IT sector) seems to be very interested in (digital) social innovations, those institutions at the moment shouldering the provision of services to marginalised persons are not perceived as a player fostering social innovation. But comparing the potential to actually tackle social needs, established welfare institutions seem to be much better equipped for sustainable provisions than the relatively young field of grass root organisations at the moment being considered as social innovators. Combining both – the power, experience and sustainability of established welfare actors and the innovative services introduced by small actors in specific fields of needs – promises better exploitation of the added value of digital social innovations for vulnerable persons.

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Annex:

Pictures











