

Chapter 84

ICT for Social Inclusion and Equal Opportunities: CETI-D, An E-Governance Good Practice in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors discuss a Knowledge Economy-based approach to the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PwD). The approach, different from the traditional assistance model, considers PwD as active and valuable members of the present Knowledge Society, to be included in the active workforce. This is discussed with reference to a specific operational case study concerning the establishment of the Center of Excellence for Technology and Innovation in Favor of Persons with Disabilities (CETI-D) conceived by Fondazione Rosselli Americas and being implemented by the State of Sao Paulo in Brazil. At the beginning of the chapter, the authors discuss the problem of the inclusion of PwD as a further aspect of the digital divide phenomenon. Then, the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are presented—some international best practices concerning the social inclusion of PwD are also introduced. Later, the authors discuss the CETI-D initiative, with the aim of showing how ICT can represent a powerful tool for social and economic inclusion. Finally, the authors discuss the conditions under which the experience of the CETI-D can be replicated in other countries, with a specific focus on less developed countries.

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INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities represent approximately one sixth of the working age population globally. This raises the problem of how this substantial part of the potential workforce can be made productive and be included within the active population. ICT represents a powerful tool that can be used to foster the social inclusion of People with Disabilities (PwD), when used within a broader approach of a knowledge society. In today's knowledge society and related knowledge economy, no one anywhere in the world can actually be excluded from the use of ICT and digital interfaces. Globally, in 2008, there were 1.9 billion people with access to a personal computer at home, 1.7 billion Internet users, 4.9 billion people with access to a TV at home and over 4.6 billion mobile subscriptions. The situation in Brazil is not different. In Brazil, in 2007, there were 29 million people with access to a personal computer, 63.6 million Internet users, 113.4 million mobile subscriptions, and 36.9 million telephone land lines. These figures are increasing by the day in very large proportions. That means that in any corner of the world today, there are digital interfaces changing the lives of people, making them more productive and giving them access to a new information society. It is not a rich country paradigm, it is a universal paradigm. The pervasiveness of digital technologies and digital interfaces increases the risk of social and economic exclusion for those that cannot access and/or use them. People with disabilities are among those for which this risk is highest (Goggin & Newell, 2003).

In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) to foster the social inclusion of PwD. Article 9 of the Convention defines accessibility in a very strict fashion. Article 9 actually elevates access to ICTs on a par with access to the physical environment and to transportation. It means that, for instance, a Webmaster has as

much obligation to make a Website accessible as an architect has an obligation to put a ramp at the appropriate physical access to a building. This has immense consequences because many ICT interfaces are inaccessible today. In effect, almost half of the articles which are non-procedurals of the CRPD have some form of ICT accessibility obligation. There are a number of application areas considered in the CRPD. Some of them are specific articles of the convention, such as e-government, media and Internet, education, employment, political rights, emergency services, cultural life and leisure, private sector services, personal mobility, rehabilitation. All those sectors of application have mandates for accessibility or reasonable accommodation or for promoting assistive technologies in different cases.

PwD have specific needs—transportation, communications, medical attention, public services, among others—of whose provision the whole society is responsible, not only the State. In addition to the public sector accessibility provisions that a state must undertake, the CRPD also mentions that a ratifying state must ensure that private entities that offer facilities and services to the public take into account the accessibility of those services. That also includes ICT accessibility. This means that a ratifying state has to make sure that any digital interface or any services, whoever delivers them, have to be accessible.

Accessibility is a pre-requisite for social inclusion and ICT accessibility is the condition that can turn ICT from a potential cause of exclusion into a powerful tool of social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities within the active labor force and, therefore, in the present knowledge society. PwD have specific capabilities and specialized knowledge revealed by scientific research and empirical evidence, associated to the need to compensate for lost senses, limited mobility or other impediment. Through social inclusion, PwD can make significant contributions to today's knowledge society and knowledge economy, as

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