Chapter 19

ICT Policies on Structural and Socio–Cultural Participation in Brussels

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors present an overview and an evaluation of ICT policy in Brussels based on an analysis of policy documents and interviews with 12 policy experts. They discuss two types of policies enhancing structural participation (digital education policy for youngsters and digital adult education policy) and two types of policies enhancing socio-cultural participation (wireless networks in Brussels and E-government of Brussels) To contextualize this presentation of policies some results from a survey among youngsters (N=1005) and from exploratory focus groups will be used as well. These policies are evaluated as policies with a well-intended access approach, but the necessity to focus more on digital education and not only on digital access is stressed.

INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion is an important principle in policy discussions (Commission of the European Communities, 2005; Fielden & Malcolm, 2009; Talbot, 2004; United Nations, 2005) Social inclusion refers to the equal participation of all social groups in society. In contemporary welfare states social inclusion is seen as an objective inherent in its core philosophy. In other words, welfare states claim to be inclusive states. Therefore, no social

groups should be left in a marginalized position. This ideal of social inclusion also implies that citizenship in welfare states is more than merely legal citizenship. Citizenship should be a social citizenship, which implies social participation.

In this chapter we assess how specific initiatives of the regional government of Brussels in Belgium try to achieve this goal. Brussels is not only the capital city, but also a region in the federal state of Belgium. Therefore, we will look at the social inclusion policy of the government of the Brussels agglomeration, the region that encompasses the city of Brussels and its 18 neighbouring suburbs.

There are many ways to achieve social inclusion, but one that has gained major importance over the last decade is social inclusion that is the result of ICT possession and use. Citizenship has been called digital citizenship (d'Haenens, Koeman & Saeys, 2007; Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2008; Servaes, 2003), and contemporary society has been referred to as an information society. Many international policy documents have promoted the possibilities ICTs could contribute to social inclusion. For instance, in the Bucharest Declaration (2002), a European policy document on the development of the information society, we read: "The Information Society offers great potential in promoting sustainable development, democracy, transparency, accountability and good governance" (p.1); and "Access and contribution to knowledge and information broaden the contents of the public domain and foster mutual understanding and respect for diversity"(p.2). In the "United Nations Global E-government Readiness Report 2005. From E-government to E-inclusion" we read (2005):

The potential [of ICTs] stems from the unique ability to provide access to unlimited information at any time irrespective of the distance and access to each person, and irrespective of location, to participate in proffering what he/she values which should be produced by the society. Information technologies facilitate the dissemination of information and the opportunity of feedback as they promote access to government and are the perfect conduit for citizen-government participation to promote public value, and therefore, inclusion (p.114).

This euphoric rhetorical discourse sometimes contrasts with the results that we find in the research literature on the digital divide (for instance, Korupp & Szydlikk, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005) To bridge the gap between the possibilities of ICTs and the reality of the digital divide a comprehensive ICT policy is needed. The task of those responsible for ICT policies is to develop initiatives that make

ICT use and possession more widespread. Indeed, if ICTs have intrinsic capacities to promote social inclusion, it will be necessary to make all social groups participate in the information society. The objective of this chapter is to produce an inventory of ICT policy initiatives in Brussels, and to evaluate if these initiatives result in a higher level of social inclusion. The inventory is based on a critical analysis of policy documents and twelve expert interviews.

In the next section of this article ("Background") we will identify some dimensions of social inclusion and some aspects of social participation, because social participation has to be considered as the key to achieve social inclusion. A distinction between structural and socio-cultural participation will allow us to classify the diverse types of policy that promote digital participation.

Apart from an inventory, this chapter also attempts to evaluate the ICT policies in Brussels. Some data from the expert interviews will be used to assess these ICT policies in Brussels, in addition to data from two empirical studies on digital media possession and use in Brussels. We do not intend to present a comprehensive overview of the findings emerging from these studies here; rather we will use the data as a means towards policy evaluation. The two studies are a quantitative survey study of 1005 youngsters going to schools in Brussels and a qualitative focus group study among 69 Brussels citizens, mainly youngsters and some teachers.

We will present for each policy a description, a section on the benefits of the policy and a section on the problems of the policy. After having presented our evaluation, we conclude with a plea for a future trend in ICT policies, namely the application of a digital pedagogy paradigm.

BACKGROUND

A socially inclusive society is a society where all people, whatever their social and cultural origins

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