



A Solidarity Approach to EU's Digital Transition: certifying that no one is left behind

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Abstract

The European Union is taking unprecedented measures to accelerate the digital transition, expanding it to every realm of our lives. This policy brief draws a comparison between digitalisation and the world-wide phenomenon, globalisation, by stating that for the first time to be fair and equal, it must be based on a solidarity approach, and not leave anyone behind. Secondly, this brief presents two local-based policy recommendations to digitalisation: the creation of an EU Cross-boarders Digital Initiative and the creation of an EU Intergenerational Dialogue Initiative on Digital Skills.

Introduction

"Let us do the right thing together – with one big heart, not 27 small ones."

Ursula von der Leyen

26 March 2020

It has been one and a half year that the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe and the life of European citizens changed drastically due to the rules of social distancing. This shift in the European lives calls for a European Union's (EU) recovery strategy but it also calls for renewed solidarity.

Solidarity in the EU resembles with multiple issues, from the EU Solidarity Fund to the Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). However, in the middle of a pandemic crisis, one can say, if solidarity is one thing, it is acting "with one big heart, not 27 small ones", and it requires a common

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understanding that no one should be *left behind*.

The social distance measures imposed by the pandemic led to the acceleration of an already existent process: digitalisation. From the day-to-day life of citizens to the recovery of the European economies, digital transition has never been so pertinent. However, despite its benefits and gains, this process poses numerous challenges to society, namely to those in less-favourable positions.

Thus, this policy brief has two objectives. Firstly, it draws a comparison between globalisation and digitalisation, in the sense that the first, by not being a phenomenon based on solidarity, ended up leaving some social-groups behind. Secondly, it aims at proposing two local-based, policy solutions for a fair and just digital transition in the EU.

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From Globalisation to Digitalisation: systemic changes ...

The pandemic seems to have been the trigger to a coherent and unstoppable EU digital strategy materialised in the European Digital Compass (European Commission, 2021a). The European digital vision is thus set on four cardinal points: government,

skills, infrastructures, and business (European Commission, 2021).

As this is an all-front strategy with ambitious targets to be met by 2030 (European Commission, 2021), where even the green transition is covered (European Commission, 2021), one must ensure that this societal shift is not only focused on numbers but also on people, ensuring that no one is *left behind*.

The concept of *left-behind* emerges from the study of the globalisation phenomenon and refers to the group of citizens that feel that globalization made a negative impact on them and their community or country (Greenhood *et al*, 2020). These citizens describe to have feelings of loss, and, among other things, of job loss (Greenhood *et al*, 2020), and have one or more of the following key socio-demographic figures in common: live in rural or small towns, have low education level or/and advanced age.

Even though globalisation and digitalisation are different phenomena by concept, the latter, if not approached with solidarity, will produce inequalities that might resemble with those of the first. Some European citizens, either by losing their jobs to automation or by not being able to get one due to the lack of digital skills, will feel *left-behind* and uncared by the European community. Ultimately, this might lead to negative feelings towards the EU, as it is already the case with the ascension of populist movements in Europe, and with the vote *Leave* of the United Kingdom (Greenhood *et al*, 2020).

... and consequent inequalities

According to the *Digital Economy and Society Index*, 42 % of European citizens



still lack basic digital skills (European Commission, 2020). In this sense, ensuring that no one is *left behind* presupposes reducing the digital divide across Europe. One can find that this value hides three major digital inequalities existent in Europe: cross-national inequalities, gender-based inequalities and age-related inequalities.

1. Cross-national inequalities

Digital inequalities cross European borders, with sixteen countries below the European average level of digital skills (table 1). The gap between the highest performance country, Finland (78.4), and the lowest performance country, Italy (32.4), reveals how unequal the distribution of digital skills is in Europe.

2. Gender-based inequalities

Women as the group being particularly exposed to inequalities is nothing new. Already in 2017, OECD underlined the need for policymakers to improve women's labour market prospects in a future digital world (2017). According to Women in Digital (WID) scoreboard, women are still less likely to have specialist digital skills and work in the field of men, as only 18 % of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the EU are women, and the gender gap in basic digital skills was still 7.7 % in 2019 (European Commission, 2020).

In addition, the WID score, calculated as the weighted average of three sub-dimensions: use of internet, internet user skills and specialist skills and employment, demonstrates how these gender-based inequalities also vary cross-nationally, with

Finland, Sweden and Denmark having the most active women in the digital economy (European Commission, 2020).

3. Age-related inequalities

According to Eurostat, four in five European youngsters (80 %) have basic or above digital skills, a value 24 percentage points higher than the share of individuals aged 16 to 74 in Europe (2017). Age is particularly relevant since those in the first group are “digital natives”, born and surrounded by ICT, while the second group are “digital immigrants” that have to adapt to a fast-changing reality (Coelho *et al*, 2020).

Policy-recommendations

The EU is already aware that the accelerated rhythm of the digital transformation will leave some groups behind. In this sense, it recently launched the Digital Education Action Plan, for 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2021). Nevertheless, the present policy brief presents two bottom-up, locally focused policy recommendations to tackle the digital divide.

1. Creation of an EU Cross-boarders Initiative for Digital Literacy

To reduce the digital literacy gap between EU Member States, the policy brief proposes the creation of a cross-boarders initiative for promoting digital literacy.

The initiative will be based on a set of free, introductory level courses, concerning digital skills and popular software's, such as Microsoft Office, tools. Nevertheless, it shall also offer more advanced digital skills courses, such as statistics and design software courses.

This initiative will take advantage of the Europe Direct information centres. The Europe Direct centres, acting on a local basis, are geographically the closest EU body to most European citizens. Therefore, Europe Direct centres are the perfect place for a cross-borders digital literacy initiative to take place. In addition, since these are local centres, dispersed across the EU Member-States, citizens will feel more comfortable to expose their digital fragilities and, more comfortable to learn, since they will be in a homely environment.

This initiative will thus tackle uniformly the issue of digital skills across Europe, as it has also the potential to address specifically the digital gender-gap by promoting digital literacy amongst girls, through specifically designed courses.

2. Creation of an EU Intergenerational Dialogue Initiative on Digital Skills

The second proposal is to create an intergenerational dialogue initiative on digital skills. This initiative will connect both age groups identified before in the policy brief: the “digital natives” and the “digital immigrants”. The objective is thus, to foster intergenerational dialogue, while empowering the “digital immigrants” with basic digital skills. On the one hand, the initiative will count on motivated young Europeans as volunteers, attributing them with responsibility, and make them *feel* as a part of the digital transition process. On the other hand, the initiative will involve the more advanced-age citizens, and include them in the digital transition process, without being *left-behind*.

In the long-term, both propositions have the potential to make European citizens feel

more included in the European shift towards digitalization: citizens will rely on Europe Direct centres for digital support; youngsters will *feel as a part* of a European initiative and advanced-age citizens will not feel *left behind* by the EU.

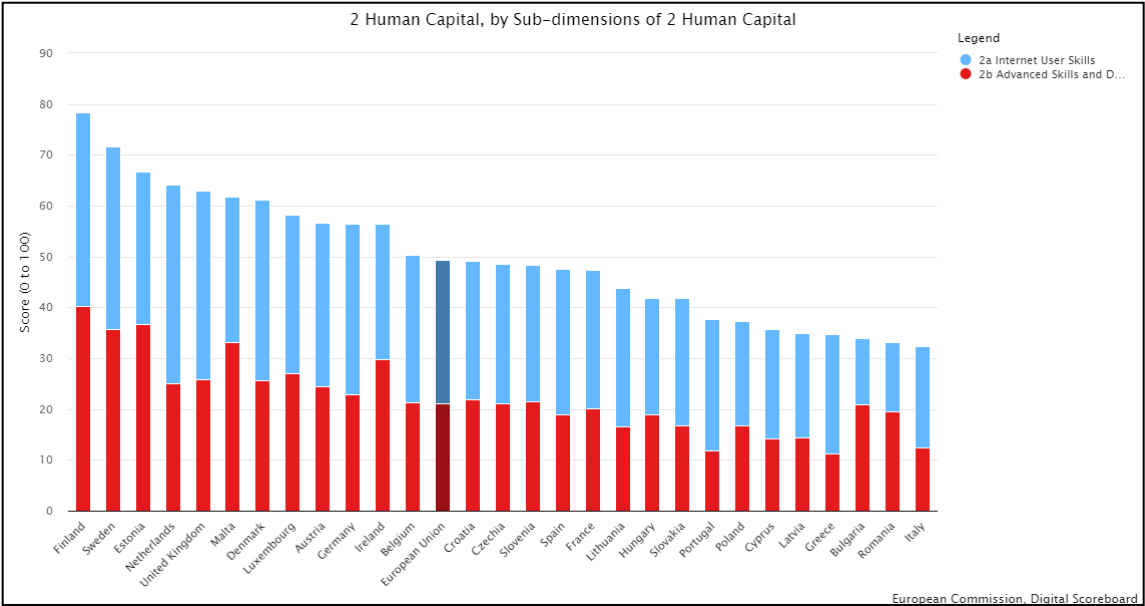
Conclusion

The present policy brief approached digitalization with a solidarity perspective: leaving no one behind. The two policy-solutions, creating an EU Cross-Borders Initiative for Digital Literacy and creating an EU Intergenerational Dialogue on Digital Skills, reveal the importance of a local-based response to the digital divide. Digital inequalities, nevertheless, surpass those addressed in this paper. The upcoming digital decade must be recognised as a momentum for not only empowering European citizens with the necessary skills for an increasing digital world, but also creating a humane digital space, that translates the European Way of Life.



Table 1

Human Capital and Digital Skills in the European Union.



Source: Digital Economy and Society Index 2020. European Commission.



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