Introduction

Dan Moxon, Adina Marina Șerban, Dunja Potočnik, Lana Pasic and Veronica Ștefan

This publication is part of the Youth Knowledge series produced by the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth; it follows on from the symposium Connecting the Dots: Young People, Social Inclusion and Digitalisation, held in Tallinn in 2018. The symposium explored the intersection between social inclusion of young people and digitalisation, reflecting especially on how digitalisation affects young people's lives, and what the role of youth policy, youth work and youth research can be in this respect. Alongside the knowledge book, a study entitled *Social inclusion, digitalisation and young people* (Șerban et al. 2020) has also been published. These various activities together can be seen as part of an emerging realisation that there is a need to focus on social inclusion as part of the digitalisation and youth agenda.

Social inclusion and young people

It is important to stress what we mean, and what we don't mean, by social inclusion in this book. We might start with the general idea that inclusion is somehow the reverse of exclusion. We might say that inclusion is about ensuring that people are not excluded from accessing education, healthcare, employment, affordable housing, a political voice, leisure activities, culture or many other things. We might then go on to say that inclusion is also linked to human rights, because human rights provide the basic minimum list of entitlements that any one person or group should have access to. We might also say that inclusion is linked to equality, because if some people have substantially less access to the world's resources than others, they are still somehow excluded.

If we consider how this might apply to young people, we must make a distinction between the social inclusion and the general inclusion of young people. These two concepts are sometimes mixed up in our multilingual European youth sector community. In this book we have tried to distinguish between them. Discussing the general inclusion of young people asks questions about the differences between generations. Exploring this leads us to consider why young people in general are more excluded from life opportunities than older generations – for instance, why they may have more precarious employment or less political influence. This type of exploration is a conversation about intergenerational inequality.

Discussing social inclusion and young people is about patterns of exclusion, inequality or denial of rights, and the way they vary between different social groups of young people. Focusing on social inclusion asks us to consider why young people with disabilities often have fewer employment and education opportunities than young people who are not disabled. It asks why young people who grow up in social care may be more likely to end up in the criminal justice system than those who don't. Or why young people from ethnic minority backgrounds may have poorer education

outcomes than majority ethnic groups. Social inclusion of young people is about the intersection of youth with other social categories. Discussing this requires an understanding that young people are not a homogeneous group, because youth as a category is intersected by other categories such as gender, sexuality, disability, rurality, ethnicity and religion. All of these topics are important, but this book is specifically focused on social inclusion and young people in the context of digitalisation.

Linking social inclusion and young people with digitalisation

In Chapter 1, Șerban and other members of the editorial team report the findings of the study on social inclusion, digitalisation and young people. This study explores policy developments relating to those three issues. Throughout Chapter 1, we identify policy initiatives (for all ages and not just for youth) that have often focused on what we might call access to the digital world. This recognises that some communities or people, perhaps as a result of living in poverty or lack of broadband infrastructure in their location, are simply less able to access digital tools and platforms. Alongside this question of access, digitalisation policy agendas have also focused on the need to educate the population to use digital tools. The goal of these initiatives is particularly to prepare society for the many digital forms of work in the future, and so the importance of training young people in these advanced digital tools is stressed within digitalisation policy. In Chapter 2, Leisti and Jaakola give an example of this form of work, exploring the role that Digitalents Helsinki plays in supporting young people who are marginalised in the labour market, helping them to access new forms of digital learning and high-tech work.

Perhaps because of the focus on connectivity within the wider digitalisation policy agenda, the youth sector and youth policy have had limited consideration of the intersection between social inclusion and digitalisation agendas. In fact, we have uncritically assumed that using digital tools would automatically promote social inclusion. Many believe that through technology we can extend the reach of youth programmes to be more inclusive. The mantra is repeated: as long as all young people can connect, we can imagine that offering youth opportunities online means that we will be offering them to all young people – so exclusion is no more!

However, as Banari (Chapter 3) along with Gombás and her colleagues (Chapter 4) highlight, access to the digital world is about more than just having a broadband connection. Just like physical spaces and traditional forms of information, modern applications and digital tools can easily exclude young people with disabilities if they are not designed to be accessible to people of all needs. Banari makes a powerful rights-based case that inclusion requires that digital technologies are designed with the purpose of being accessible and usable by people with disabilities. Gombás and her colleagues draw on their own experiences as visually impaired people to explore how access to a "screen without sight" can both include and exclude.

But social inclusion itself is about more than just accessibility. Delap, co-writing with a group of young queer activists about their experiences of the online world, shows in Chapter 5 how there is not one single online space or digital world to be connected to. Instead there are multiple virtual communities and spaces. Just like physical spaces, some online spaces can be filled with hate speech and discrimination,

while others can be enabling and affirming. Social inclusion means considering which of these virtual communities are dominant, and how that might be related to the exclusion and marginalisation of particular groups of young people. As one of the authors of this chapter says, the internet is "inherently a straight place". Panaghrahi, in Chapter 6, drawing from work in India, highlights the political consequences of this. He explores how lack of digital knowledge in minority languages can be part of the exclusion and political suppression of communities and groups in the physical world, which is something Europe can learn from in our multilingual society.

Salaj and McQuillan in Chapter 7 build upon this, highlighting how artificial intelligence, which is increasingly central to digital technologies, contains inbuilt value systems derived from the culture of the predominantly white American male billionaires that control them. They argue that the use of these technologies in policies and services for youth can inadvertently sustain discrimination and that a more democratic approach to their control is needed. Finally, in Chapter 8, Street and her colleagues show that the digital world itself may begin to exacerbate or cause harm and marginalisation. They explore the relationship between digitalisation and young people's mental health, noting the very real risks that occur for young people online, and they also challenge misconceptions.

That is not to say that digitalisation only offers the possibility of further exclusion for young people from marginalised groups. In this book there are many examples of how digital tools and technologies have facilitated social inclusion. Briggs, in Chapter 9, explores the way WhatsApp is used by refugees coming to Europe, both to provide support to each other and to stay in touch. He illustrates how, as a researcher looking to understand the needs of refugees, he needed to gain access to these virtual communities to do so. In Chapter 10, Curwen explores a similar mode of interaction, observing the ways that young people use the chat app Yik Yak, and she questions how online identities and anonymity might affect the way we offer virtual support to young people. She emphasises that for many young people it is easier to turn to peers online rather than use institutional support. Pérez-Caramés and colleagues, in Chapter 11, explore the ways in which young Spanish migrant communities use online communities as a source of support and interaction during their movements across Europe.

What is striking about all of these chapters is both how much emphasis there is on peer-to-peer support and how communities of young people are decoupled from geography. Both of these things have profound implications for the youth sector. Firstly, rather than seeing youth workers and youth programmes as providers of support to marginalised young people, we might begin to see them as curators of online spaces and communication channels, through which young people can provide support to each other. In that sense, the potential of digitalisation to empower large numbers of marginalised groups of young people begins to be revealed. However, this means that we might begin to talk of youth workers as community managers or online moderators, as much as being people who run programmes or educate.

Secondly, as shown in the work by Pérez-Caramés and her colleagues, as well as the contributions by Delap and his co-authors, these virtual communities of marginalised young people are not necessarily organised to align with the physical geographies

of place and nation. Identifying as a migrant or an LGBTQ+ young person can take precedence over physical location when a virtual community comes together. This has deep implications for youth policy. If digital spaces and virtual communities of marginalised young people are not always defined by the boundaries of the physical world, they are also not always aligned to the geopolitical boundaries of youth policy. The geographical borders within which various states, municipalities and institutions of Europe create and apply youth policies are less relevant in the virtual world. This poses deep challenges for youth policy and programmes: how do we create and resource effective policies for communities that are spread across multiple political boundaries?

We asked all authors in this volume to consider the implication of their work in relation to youth policy and practice, and there are some who focused on this directly. In Chapter 12, co-written between young people and youth workers, Taylor and his colleagues consider how using digital tools in rural areas forced them to challenge their ideas about the power balance between youth workers and young people. Schmidt and colleagues, in Chapter 13, explore the pedagogical approaches necessary to enable young people with disabilities to learn coding. In Chapter 14, Bohnenkamp and Findeisen draw on their work in a university setting to argue that there is a need to shift from education in digital skills to digital ethics.

Taking all of these complex discussions into account, two important chapters close this volume. In Chapter 15, Connolly and Kenny propose ways in which states may draw on the existing knowledge base to realise their rights-based obligations in a range of ways with holistic collaborative approaches to digital policy development. In Chapter 16, Siurala considers what all this means for the management and development of digital youth work.

However, while the volume may be closed by Chpater 16, this topic is not complete. There are many more stories of inclusions and exclusions to tell that are not covered within this book. If inclusion is the goal that the youth sector sets itself, there will always be more young people to include. There will always be more groups of young people whom we did not yet reach, more groups of young people within our societies, communities and nations who are more marginalised and excluded from their rights than others, and more excluded than you and I are. Digital tools, if used correctly, might help us be more inclusive but we should always consider inclusion as an ongoing quest.

So, while this knowledge book highlights some of what is known about the intersection between social inclusion and digitalisation, it is not comprehensive. But, if we are committed to social inclusion, we must also commit to the idea that knowledge is incomplete and partial. Knowledge is produced by someone, or some group. We are proud to present a platform through which various authors have presented their perspectives on social inclusion and digitalisation. But we caution the reader that each of these chapters is expressed from the position of the authors who write them, from their world views and rooted in their experience. From their position they see some, but not all, of the exclusions and inclusions of the digital world. The very nature of exclusion means that there will be others whose voices we have not heard, or who see the digital world differently.

Chapter 1

An overview of social inclusion, digitalisation and young people

Adina Marina Şerban, Dan Moxon, Dunja Potočnik,
Lana Pasic and Veronica Ştefan

Introduction

This chapter looks at the current effects of digitalisation on social inclusion and how the two concepts might be understood and interlinked within the youth sector. It is based on a research study in 2019 by the same group of authors, which looked at social inclusion, digitalisation and young people (Şerban et al. 2020), and the intersection of these themes across Europe.

Within the youth field, social inclusion is a concept better understood than digitalisation, because of the long-term commitment of European institutions and youth organisations to this topic, which encompasses a broad range of sub-topics, such as employment, education, employability, health or participation. Digitalisation, on the other hand, is a fairly recent topic – to society at large and to the youth sector in particular. It refers to the use of digital tools and opportunities, but also to the social phenomenon of the increasing importance of digital technology, mass communication and online spaces and communities. Digitalisation has spontaneously made its way into youth work, and its presence and use in the youth sector has grown significantly over the last few years. Now accepted as part of the sector's practice, it has often been assumed that digital tools offer a panacea for reaching out to include more young people, especially those ones considered hard to reach because of different social, geographical or economic conditions, disabilities, physical constraints or cultural barriers. Yet social inclusion, as it relates to the digital world, is about more than just access to technology and can be considered a complex, multidimensional concept.

To understand social inclusion it is of crucial importance to recognise that some groups of young people, such as those with migrant backgrounds, might encounter limited access to some life chances and opportunities when compared to others. The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership's study on barriers to social inclusion, *Finding a place in modern Europe* (EU-Council of Europe 2015b), refers to five areas of possible inclusion or exclusion: education, the labour market, living, health and participation. The five areas of social inclusion can be referred to as "safety nets" since they provide basic resources and prerequisites for the fulfilment of everyday needs. However, some of the above-mentioned groups of young people are either facing difficulties using these safety nets or are having quite unstable safety nets,

which leave them socially excluded compared to other young people. Ultimately, the social inclusion of young people cannot be understood solely by reference to youth as a homogeneous population. A full understanding of inequality, marginalisation and exclusion of different demographic sub-groups of young people is necessary.

In contemporary youth practice, digital means of social inclusion can be understood as another dimension of such safety nets, but only if the potential risks and opportunities for youth of digitalised social inclusion are very carefully considered. The rapid growth of internet access, connectivity and reliance on technology has not only determined the swift development of the digital world; it has also determined a new landscape for inequality, caused by varying access to digital tools and instruments as well as exclusion or inclusion within online spaces and communities. Technological change has had profound implications on young people's development and social integration. It requires them to quickly build the skills and competences needed for the digital era. Yet, "being digitally competent is more than being able to use the latest smartphone or computer software — it is about being able to use such digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative way" (European Commission 2017).

The first part of this chapter looks at existing digital policies at the European level before exploring their intersection with youth policy and the social inclusion of marginalised young people, produced through a documentary analysis of the various European supranational policy-making bodies. This is then followed by an analysis of national youth policies and youth sector practice at national and local level. This analysis is based on an open questions survey, including correspondents from the European Centre for Knowledge on Youth Policy (ECKYP) and other core stakeholders from the European youth sector. Overall, 38 respondents from 23 countries responded to the questionnaire. While this represents a small sample size, the aim of the analysis is to provide a snapshot of the relevant practices in the youth sector and to explore how digital tools are used to promote social inclusion across Europe.

Review of relevant policies at European and national levels

In this section, by reviewing the relevant documents, we explore essential concepts such as digital accessibility and digital inclusion, looking for digital means of youth social inclusion. We analyse the questionnaires and those existing practices at the national and local level which have the potential of being replicated in other contexts.

Relevant policies at the European Union Level

The European Union (EU) emphasises that Europe needs digitally smart people in order to successfully undergo digital transformation (European Commission 2016). Digital transformation involves the active inclusion of young people, ensuring that they are fully prepared to take advantage of digitalisation. It is argued that European governments understand both the changing realities shaped by digitalisation and the need for a policy framework that will facilitate the use of opportunities and regulate the potential risks of this new context.

When it comes to European policy on youth and digitalisation, the agenda has two dimensions. First, the digitalisation agenda, driven primarily by the EU, which

at times refers to young people but not through a separate agenda; this is a plan for all EU citizens. Second, the youth policy agenda, driven by both the EU and the Council of Europe, which is now increasingly focused on promoting digital tools in the youth sector. In both dimensions, the relationship between social inclusion and digitalisation has the potential of becoming one of the key topics in the near future but is not always directly addressed.

Until the present, European bodies have generally looked at the social inclusion of young people through the social investment approach (Eurofound 2015). They have mainly focused on reducing the barriers to access – such as reducing bureaucratic procedures or paperwork. Moreover, the new policies and programmes have aimed to facilitate access through applications to different youth programmes and projects for socially disadvantaged youth, for which purpose digital tools have been seen as essential.

Since 2010 many EU countries have engaged in developing frameworks and policies addressing digitalisation and new technologies. The EU took responsibility for harmonising and co-ordinating these efforts, first in 2010 with the adoption of the Digital Agenda for Europe (European Commission 2010b), later intensified in 2015 with the Digital Single Market for Europe (European Commission 2015), when digitalisation was highlighted as the second top priority out of the 10 identified for the 2014-2019 Commission plan, and finally in 2020, with the new EU digital strategy, Europe Fit for the Digital Age, closely linked with the EU flagship initiative – the European Green Deal, aiming to build on previous policy efforts by putting the citizen at its centre. One of the three pillars is focused on "Technology that works for the people", including actions that address investment in digital competences and the development of artificial intelligence that respects people's rights and is designed to earn their trust (European Commission 2020b).

Overall it has been noted that the biggest budgets and most important priorities have been mostly related to connectivity or internet infrastructure. It is only in recent years that more visibility has been given to education and inclusion, as 43% of EU citizens still lack basic digital skills (European Commission 2019b).

The EU Digital Single Market included as a priority "An inclusive e-society – The Commission aims to support an inclusive Digital Single Market in which citizens and businesses have the necessary skills and can benefit from interlinked and multilingual e-services, from e-government, e-justice, e-health, e-energy or e-transport". In this context the EU has included as a specific priority within EU funding (EU Social Fund, Regional funds or Erasmus+) the development of skills necessary in this new digital era.

From the EU perspective, digital inclusion is mainly focused on making information and communication technologies (ICT) more accessible and using ICT to reduce marginalisation. Lately, policy and programmes have been developed with the aim of increasing the participation rate of disadvantaged people in public, social and economic activities through social inclusion projects. In the field of youth, it is also relevant that the Commission, through its programmes and policies, acts to address the needs of young people with a great focus on young people in NEET (not in education, employment or training) situations. A new skills agenda for Europe (European Commission 2016) highlighted the need for member states to set up national digital

strategies by mid-2017 and to have efficient measures put in place so that the skills required by the labour market, including digital skills, can be developed within their education systems.

While the EU's digital agenda is not youth-specific, it provides a key backdrop and discourse that has framed much of initial discussion about social inclusion, digitalisation and youth. This discourse brings in two dimensions that inform thinking about social inclusion in youth policy: firstly, the importance of making access to the internet and internet services more equitable, and secondly the importance of developing digital skills in order to be included in the employment market. These dimensions can both be seen in the work of the European Commission's 2016 expert group on "risks, opportunities and implications of digitalisation for youth, youth work and youth policy" which focused on reviewing the "digital natives" discourse and looking at the challenges that young people face in the online world and at the impact of the internet and social media on youth participation and youth work. In addition, the study on youth participation in democratic life (European Commission 2013) went on to highlight how the digital divide created by access to the internet and social media for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds also leads to the "voice divide" on digital platforms.

Within this overarching context, the youth policy agenda has focused primarily on the use of digital tools in the youth sector. It is argued that as young people's needs and interests change – and particularly as they embrace the online world – youth work should also evolve. This requires youth workers to develop their digital skills to be able to conduct smart youth work and understand the issues that youth face online. The EU Council's resolution on encouraging the political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe (Council of the EU 2015) states the need for transparent and easy-to-communicate actions and policies in terms of inclusivity and equal access for all young people, including the development of digital tools for political participation.

In addition, smart youth work methodologies are designed to align with the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (European Commission 2017) and the Digital Education Action Plan (European Commission 2018b). Online participation is also seen as enabling and empowering, as promoted by the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which invites EU member states to "explore and promote the use of innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation, e.g. digital democracy tools, and facilitate access in order to support youth participation in democratic life and engage young people in an inclusive way, while being aware that some young people do not have access to the internet and digital technologies, or the skills to use them" (European Commission 2018c). The central idea is that usage of digital media revolves around their functions as enabling, capacitating and empowering agents. These functions of digital media are backed by their two most powerful characteristics – anonymity and protection of identity. Young people are strongly attracted by the anonymity of digital media, especially when it comes to their use in leisure-time activities.

Engaging, Connecting and Empowering Young People: A New EU Youth Strategy (European Commission 2018c) underlines all the challenges and risks that young people are facing in contemporary societies. But it also states that "this generation

is the best educated ever and among the most creative in using Information and Communication Technologies and social media". Member states are invited to adapt digital opportunities and to create the framework for youth workers to use the technology alongside their pedagogical practices to increase access and help young people cope with digital means.

In addition, steps should be taken to encourage the participation of marginalised youth in democratic life through digital tools. The policy documents mentioned above suggest that decision makers should be transparent about their actions and use more social media tools to communicate with young people. The development of digital skills was also extensively promoted through the EU programme in the field of youth – Erasmus+ 2012-2018 and through the EU Youth Dialogue. One of the key actions that could address the digital divide is the European Solidarity Corps Programme, which aims to "enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities with a view to contributing to strengthening cohesion, solidarity and democracy in Europe, with particular effort to the promotion of social inclusion" (European Parliament 2018).

The Council of Europe

The Council of Europe has worked extensively on ensuring a safer internet for children and young people. The Council of Europe's Internet Governance Strategy (2012-2015) attaches importance to the rights of internet users, while the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021), reinforced by Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment (Council of Europe 2018), focused on children's rights on the internet. The documents are in line with the Guide to Human Rights for Internet Users (Council of Europe 2014) that has a dedicated section for children and young people.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights (Council of Europe 2017a: 18-19) acknowledged that – as one of the means of accomplishing youth social inclusion – all young people should have equal access to public amenities, including post offices, community centres, youth work centres, employment services and ICT.

Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment (Council of Europe 2018) calls upon the member states to ensure that policies and initiatives are informed by rigorous and up-to-date evidence about young people's experiences in the digital environment. It should be done in order to map existing opportunities and risks for young people, identify emerging trends and guide the targeting of policy and resources to ensure young people's well-being in the digital environment.

Joint efforts: the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership

In 2018 the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership organised the symposium Young People, Social Inclusion and Digitalisation, in Tallinn, Estonia, to discuss the

intersection between social inclusion of young people and digitalisation. The event produced a set of conclusions in the report Connecting the Dots (EU-Council of Europe 2018b), indicating that the digital reality further increases inequalities and exacerbates the accumulation of advantages and disadvantages, so we need to better understand the reality of digitalisation in young people's lives, the implications for the youth sector and the adaptions required from youth work and youth policy in order to be better prepared to face the challenges and exploit the opportunities that current and new digital tools and trends offer. Furthermore, the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership has produced extensive knowledge on the theme of social inclusion, in particular: the Youth Knowledge book *Social inclusion for young people: breaking down the barriers* (EU-Council of Europe 2007), the follow-up to the study Mapping of Barriers to Social Inclusion of Young People in Vulnerable Situations, titled *Finding a place in modern Europe* (EU-Council of Europe 2015b), the outcomes of the seminar on the role of youth work in supporting young people in vulnerable situations (EU-Council of Europe 2014), Beyond Barriers: a youth policy seminar on social inclusion of young people in vulnerable situations in South East Europe (EU-Council of Europe 2015c), *T-Kit 8: Social Inclusion* (Council of Europe 2017b) and the knowledge stemming from the symposium on Youth Participation in the Digitalised World (EU-Council of Europe 2015a). In addition, the symposium (Un)Equal Europe in 2016 explored the increasing inequalities among young people due to social, geographic or economic reasons and the polarisation of society with respect to accumulation of advantages and/or disadvantages.

The Youth Department of the Council of Europe's seminar Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Young People, in December 2019, discussed approaches to and understandings of artificial intelligence (AI), its impact on young people and the role of the youth sector in working with AI. In 2016, the EU organised an expert group on "Risks, opportunities and implications of digitalisation for youth, youth work and youth policy", under the Work Plan for Youth 2016-2018, which produced *Developing digital youth work. Policy recommendations, training needs and good practice examples for youth workers and decision-makers* (European Commission 2019a: 6).

In general, European youth policy for both the EU and the Council of Europe has presented the use of digital tools as a solution to inclusion. It is generally assumed that digital tools are, by design, more inclusive and provide an advantage for the youth sector in reaching young people from marginalised backgrounds. But it may not be the case for all groups of young people (see for example Chapter 4 by Gombás et al. and Chapter 5 by Moxon et al., in this volume) and this assumption requires greater critical scrutiny and further research.

National policies relating to youth, digitalisation and social inclusion

Respondents to the survey (n=38) provide examples of national policies and initiatives that address digitalisation and connect with young people's skills, inclusion or online safety in 23 different countries. The examples highlight efforts made by various governments to advance the digital agenda and promote digital skills, particularly in formal education (including by updating national curricula or supporting teachers'

skills), to support infrastructure development, to ensure schools' access to internet and to develop digital public services. Unsurprisingly, considering that this is a new topic in the field, most answers relate to social inclusion policies and to measures that indicate fairly limited use of new technologies. The examples highlight practices where digitalisation is used as a tool to reach out to young people or cases where digital instruments are put in place for reasons of innovation or for the general advancement of society.

Across the responses, there are countries where clear and well-defined national policies and initiatives – addressing digitalisation and connections with young people's skills, inclusion or online safety – have been put in place, such as Albania (through the National Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth Online) or Estonia, as well as countries where the available European grant schemes have allowed the development of pilot initiatives, such as Belgium (Pilot initiative Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange).

In other countries, such as Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Malta and Serbia, the subject of digitalisation mainly resides with the formal education system, linking ICT, STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and digitalisation. In the case of more recently adopted national youth strategies, there are references to digitalisation and inclusion of young people, even if they are not shaped as separate pillars (e.g. Greece).

There are also some examples of local policies targeting the advancement of digitalisation and the development of digital skills, as in the case of Tartu Municipality in Estonia where citizens can engage online using ICT and smart solutions in decision making in the city. Furthermore, it is clear that various public institutions across Europe have successfully developed online tools which allow for more transparent and faster approaches that could foster the social inclusion of young people – from the online platforms that monitor and support young people (the Estonian tool that monitors young people at risk of exclusion and provides early intervention measures) to the participation platforms for young people and youth organisations (Greece) or overall monitoring related to the process of digitalisation (Austria).

Overall, there are very few examples of national youth policies directly addressing both social inclusion and digitalisation. That is not necessarily to say that the digitalisation agenda omits social inclusion, but that social inclusion generally remains a peripheral consideration. This is a direct contrast to the national youth policies' approach, where social inclusion is not generally accepted as being a core value or consideration in any new programme or policy.

Social inclusion, digitalisation and young people: relevant practices across Europe

In addition to the policy dimension, 15 respondents identified youth sector practices that were relevant to social inclusion and digitalisation. These encompassed two dimensions:

1. Digital tools and online platforms available to young people and youth workers, or other platforms used by public institutions with the aim of fostering social inclusion.

2. Educational digital programmes and opportunities for:
    a. young people, including marginalised groups,
    b. youth workers and teachers.

Most of the examples presented were open access platforms accessible to those who are already familiar with ICT and who do not necessarily question the accessibility of these instruments – neither in terms of abilities nor knowledge. Not all of these platforms are directly targeting marginalised young people in order to promote social inclusion, but they are certainly a useful tool towards achieving that goal – particularly in the areas of education, mental and sexual health, cyber bullying and the rights of minorities. Youth workers and other youth practitioners have started to use some of these platforms, trying to improve the outreach of their projects and initiatives.

Most of the platforms identified had been developed by NGOs or private entities, while some were created by governmental bodies. The majority of them are designed exclusively for young people, addressing topics such as education, mental and sexual health, cyber bullying or rights of minorities. While many of these digital tools are mostly available through websites, a large majority also include mobile versions or applications and are accompanied by complementary means of communication, such as chat rooms, instant messaging apps, e-mails or phone lines. With most of the identified practices, young people were the beneficiaries rather than co-creators of the developed platforms, which makes it difficult to evaluate the extent to which these tools directly cater for young people's needs and interests, particularly those youth at risk of exclusion.

In terms of topics that the platforms cover, the practices can be clustered into six main categories:

1. Educational and professional guidance platforms, which help young people to engage in educational programmes, gain ICT skills, self-assess their skills and knowledge, identify and apply for jobs, and engage in gamified activities that reward involvement in various activities.
2. Information and counselling platforms are designed to raise awareness and provide guidance on a number of issues relevant to young people, from emotional well-being, self-esteem and the rights of young people (particularly those belonging to communities of ethnic minorities, refugees, immigrants, LGBTQIA+) to social problems and relationship issues (couples, friendship, family).
3. Health-related platforms range from mental health (addressed to young people in emotional crisis, depression and suicidal behaviour), substance and alcohol abuse, sexual activity or HIV services. Many of these platforms include 24/7 assistance, where young people can receive tailored support. In some cases they ensure the anonymity of the young person, in order to provide an open and safe space for sharing.
4. Platforms specifically targeted at marginalised young people are designed to support people of all ages with different disabilities, and not only youth, and enhance their capacity to participate in society. Such examples include mobile applications that guide visually impaired people (with voice information for their better orientation outdoors), light or motion detectors, scanning and

reading apps, or even Web platforms for physically disadvantaged people, which provide information about events that are accessible for them.

5. Online safety platforms are particularly addressed to children and teenagers, aiming to empower and protect them from the risks associated with online activity. They particularly deal with issues related to cyberbullying, illegal and harmful content or behaviour, and hate speech. Most of these platforms are accompanied by helplines or other online reporting mechanisms. These tools can be used by young people or by the adults around them to report online abuse.

6. Dialogue and consultation platforms and permanent websites have been developed, following the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, by national youth councils and other youth organisations, as means of facilitating the EU Youth Dialogue and Structured Dialogue.

In summary, it can be concluded that, while the digital tools being developed by the youth sector clearly do address topics and themes that are relevant to the social inclusion of young people, social inclusion is not necessarily at the heart of their design, development and purpose. That is to say, the accessibility needs of young people from marginalised backgrounds are not necessarily their main focus, and nor are the platforms specifically targeted at or developed for marginalised groups, who also have a limited role in their development.

Conclusion

Digitalisation is vital and inevitable in young people's future: they use digital tools and instruments to communicate, to learn or to exchange information, for leisure and entertainment, having a deep appreciation of digital practices and of the opportunities these practices can offer them. Digital tools can help them find creative solutions to the challenges they face in the digital age. But the digital age does not have the same set of benefits for all young people. Those groups of young people facing fewer opportunities due to their social, economic or geographical background, and young people from minority groups, are still facing obstacles in benefiting from the opportunities that the digital world offers. The analysis and conclusions from the study indicate that the state authorities and youth NGOs are still behind in offering an inclusive online participatory frame for all young people.

The state authorities have developed digital tools and instruments that are either targeted at the formal education system or are aiming to improve young people's access to employment opportunities. However, these do not encompass the full "safety net" perspective. Moreover, very few of the initiatives target young people directly. Even if certain measures are in place, they are provided for all citizens and do not take into account the particular needs and interests of young people. Youth NGOs are slowly moving towards smart youth work services, but they are still at the stage of training their youth work professionals in entering the digital world.

Consequently, the initiatives that are placed at the intersection between the two themes – social inclusion and digitalisation – are still at their very early stages. The policy analysis and the practices identified show that different platforms were developed and policy processes were put in place to reach out to young people at

risk of social exclusion. Because many young people still live in environments that cannot support their access to the digital world – neither in terms of connectivity nor in terms of safety on the internet – there is a clear need for policies and practices that would leverage the possibilities of the digital world to support the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. There is also a growing need to develop cross-sectoral co-operation activities that would make young people's voices heard, particularly those who have been marginalised in both online and offline discussions.

Finally, young people from vulnerable backgrounds are often perceived as the beneficiaries of the implemented processes rather than having an active role in decision making. Cross-sectoral co-operation would also require that policies aiming to ensure social inclusion through digitalisation would be developed not only for young people, but also together with them, in order to respond to their needs and interests. Overall there is a generalised assumption that digital tools can provide a solution to inclusion, but further critical examination of this claim is required in light of practice. However, there is a clear need to place social inclusion at the centre of all digitalisation initiatives.

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