

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (1996), "Voluntary sector may miss out in the Information Society," *Poverty Today* 33, 7.

## **Voluntary sector may miss out in the Information Society**

For years, community and voluntary organisations have been using information technologies - such as phones, fax machines, and computers - in their work to promote social inclusion and democratic development. Currently, there is strong interest in exploiting the Internet for this purpose. The Internet uses the public telephone system to connect computers and is accessible to any organisation with the right computer equipment and the budget to cover the Internet service and telephone charges. This computer network allows community and voluntary organisations to find, exchange and communicate information more efficiently and cheaply than by phone, fax or post.

The high level of interest in this technology was evident at Harnessing the Internet, a conference hosted by Dublin City University in September. About 150 participants representing more than 80 community and voluntary organisations attended the one-day event. Dozens more had been turned away in the week prior to the event, after booking was closed when the all the places were filled. The conference was an opportunity for organisations to discuss how they were using the Internet for their work. For instance, the European Institute of Women's Health in Dublin has developed an interactive information package on breast cancer available both on the Internet and on diskette for those without Internet access.

DCU's School of Communications organised the Internet conference as part of its two-year research project, *The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age*. To date, the major project activity has been a questionnaire survey of the use of information technologies by Irish community and voluntary organisations.

The survey found that an Internet e-mail address was associated with a more sophisticated use of computers - many organisations using hardware such as CD-ROMS and document scanners added on a modem and Internet service as part of their general high-end approach to computer technology. An e-mail address was a feature of 14 percent of all the organisations surveyed, but this figure varied considerably according to several factors.

The most significant factor was a higher annual income. Among organisations with incomes less than IR£10,000, only three percent had an e-mail address at the time of the survey in early 1996, but for those with an income of more than IR£100,000, 27 percent had an e-mail address. An e-mail address was more prevalent also among organisations with an EU or national focus than those with a neighbourhood focus. The need for better communication links was the most important factor reported to encourage Internet use, followed by the need to be professional and the need for better access to information.

The survey also found a disparity of Internet and computer use among organisations with different interests. At the bottom of the scale were those with an interest in women. These

organisations were much less likely than others to use computers or the Internet, and particularly so if they also had a low annual income.

This disparity of Internet use among organisations is disturbing. It means that lower-income organisations - including thousands of neighbourhood and community development groups - and women's groups will be marginalised or excluded from the emerging communication networks on the Internet.

Organisations excluded from the computer network would be disadvantaged in many ways. For instance, the government and grant aid organisations will likely make applications for funding available on their Internet Web sites. The community and voluntary organisations that can access these documents quickly and conduct information exchanges by e-mail will be much better-placed than those without this capability. If the Internet does become a common means of information exchange, not having Internet access could be as exclusive as not having a telephone is today.

Analysis of the survey indicates that by mid-1998, an Internet e-mail address will be a feature of: two of three higher-income organisations (income more than IR£100,000); one in three middle-income organisations; and only one in five lower-income organisations (income less than IR£10,000). It is impossible to forecast a figure for the community and voluntary sector as a whole. However, considering that many thousands of small community organisations represent a significant part of this sector, a figure closer to one in five with an e-mail address seems likely.

It is ironic that many voluntary and community organisations will be excluded from the emerging information and communication networks at a time when their participation is urgently needed to develop the Irish "information society." Capitalising on the production and exchange of information has been a focus of economic development policies here for some time. In the computer industry alone, the top six companies - Intel, Apple Computer, Dell, Gateway 2000, Microsoft and AST Ireland - together employed more than 8,000 people and reported a net income of more than IR£4.3 billion in Ireland last year.

The Irish information society has recently become the focus of discussions and initiatives designed to develop its potential even further but the community and voluntary sector has been virtually excluded from the discussion arena. For instance, the government established an Information Society Steering Committee to recommend policies in this area. The committee is comprised of: 11 members from the corporate sector, six from government, two from the academic community, one representing trade unions, and none from the community and voluntary sector. Only two of the 20 members are women.

Much of the talk and evolving policies are firmly rooted in the belief that the private sector should be left alone to get on with its business of exploiting the potential of the information society, and that market forces will somehow deliver its benefits to every Irish citizen. Missing from the discussion is evidence or even any indication that the market-driven model of the information society will lead to democratic social and

economic development. In other countries, this model has been strongly associated with deepening social divisions and exclusion, and there is no reason to assume it would be different in Ireland.

For instance, the United States is where the "information society" concept developed more than 30 years ago. Since that time, the US has become the most economically divided society in the industrial world. The gap between the rich and poor in the US has been rising steadily for more than two decades, and the child poverty rate is now four times the average of Western Europe. In fact, the Internet, often acclaimed as the egalitarian linchpin of the information society, is itself an elite communications medium - the most comprehensive survey to date of Internet users in the US found that their average annual salary was \$63,000.

Computers and telecommunications do have the potential to assist democratic social development. However, social development relies heavily on the resources and skills of the people involved and the information and communication resources at their disposal. In Ireland, as in most countries, the work of combatting social exclusion and promoting democratic development has traditionally fallen to the voluntary and community sector of the economy, and it is vital that this sector has access to the tools and resources needed to continue its mandate.

The DCU survey suggests at least two policy directions in this area. First, to develop an infrastructure to assist efforts by organisations to use computers, including: training, technical support, acquiring computer hardware and software, and ongoing maintenance. Survey analysis indicates that participation on the Internet will be possible only if organisations become more comfortable and competent with the use of computers in general, and this should be the primary objective of this support infrastructure. Second, Internet development and support initiatives should be focused on the specific "problem" areas: low-income organisations, neighbourhood organisations and women's groups.

On this second point, a remarkable feature of the DCU conference was the high number of women participants and the request by four women's groups at the event for support to develop the use of information technology within their organisations. It is worth noting that the Women's Resource and Development Agency in Belfast is launching a new information technology project, Women Talking, to develop a communications infrastructure in support of women's participation and community action in the North. It would seem that a similar initiative in the South would not be misplaced. A planned follow-up to the DCU conference is a meeting for women's groups to discuss these issues.

Another action following on from the DCU conference is a meeting of community and voluntary organisations wanting to participate in the policy development of the information society. Their input at this stage of the national process could ensure that the community and voluntary sector will play a key role in developing more democratic information and communications infrastructures in Ireland.