Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (1998), "Responses to Social Disadvantage in the Information Society," in *Getting Connected: Social Inclusion in the Information Society - A Review of the ICT strategy of the EU-EMPLOYMENT Initiative,* WRC, ed. Dublin: WRC Social and Economic Consultants Ltd, 89-105.

Responses to Social Disadvantage in the Information Society

Making social inclusion a priority in the "information society"

The "information society," according to the most recent EU and Irish social policy documents on the topic, "is not a society far away in the future but a reality in daily life." The "information society" is here, now. (1)

The EU and Irish policy documents propose that the "information society" offers opportunities for disadvantaged groups, such as the unemployed, disabled and unskilled to acquire new competencies and skills and participate more fully in paid employment. They also suggest that without adequate policies and planning, the "information society" not only will exclude those already marginalised in society but also will result in increased levels of social and economic exclusion.

However, the "information society" policy documents are notably short on concrete proposals to encourage social inclusion. This chapter looks at how the EMPLOYMENT Initiative and like-minded initiatives can contribute to greater social inclusion in the "information society" and to policy and practice reflecting the needs of the socially marginalised and excluded.

The discussion will highlight four responses to social exclusion and disadvantage in the "information society," namely:

- Creating new opportunities in the IT labour market
- Using the Internet for organised community and voluntary work
- Supporting the use of information and communication technologies in disadvantaged communities
- Participating in policy making on the "information society"

By way of introduction, we will recall that "information society" is a term used originally to describe an economy whose base had shifted from manufacturing work to information and knowledge work. More recently, it has come to mean a society in which new information and communication technologies (ICTs) play a central role.

Among the benefits of this new society, according to the EU, are huge new capacities to human intelligence, a more caring European society, and a significantly higher quality of life. However, many social scientists and historians have challenged this optimistic vision, and the possibilities for inclusion or exclusion in the "information society" have become the subject of considerable debate. (2)

It is certainly true that the past 20 years has seen the widespread diffusion of new ICTs in the industrial nations. However, the same period has also seen a slowdown in productivity growth, the emergence of high levels of unemployment in many nations, and increasing inequality in the distribution of income and wealth in most of the West.

Looking at the United States, the prototype "information society," we find the most deeply divided society in the industrial world. The wealthiest one percent of households in the US own nearly 40 percent of the nation's wealth, and the child poverty rate is four times the average of the Western European nations.

While there is no necessary causal link between the diffusion of new ICTs and deepening social inequality, the historical evidence does beg the question of how exactly the democratic and enlightened "information society" envisioned in the policy documents of the EU and Ireland will come to pass.

Significantly, the defining feature of the US, Irish and EU policy approaches to the "information society" is the same - the priority given to the needs of industry and the central role of market mechanisms as a means to regulate the resources of the "information society." The preface to the 1994 Bangemann report, the cornerstone of EU "information society" policy, "urges the European Union to put its faith in market mechanisms as the motive power to carry us into the Information Age."

Accordingly, Ireland's Partnership 2000 document - which outlines the newest social partnership agreement on the nation's social and economic growth into the next century - identifies the "information society" as the primary strategic area of modernisation of the economy and promises actions "to maximise the economic benefits of the information society and the utilisation of information and communications technology to sustain and improve the competitiveness of Irish-based enterprise."

The private sector should of course be involved in developing economic policies and the digital infrastructure. The issue is whether private interests should be directing government policy on the "information society," industry should be the primary consideration in determining the policy priorities, and the market should be the prime mechanism for regulating the resources.

The essential and obvious problem with an industry and market-driven "information society" is that the bottom line will be profit, not social inclusion. Given that the target of social inclusion in the "information society" is not driving policy, it is no wonder the socially excluded are left out.

This chapter considers how initiatives which target social inclusion, primarily those funded through the EMPLOYMENT initiative, can provide models of good practice and innovative use of information and communication technologies to promote social inclusion in the "information society. It is to these four types of initiatives that we now turn.

Creating new opportunities in the IT labour market

The central issue in this discussion is meaningful employment in the "information society." Looking specifically at the large and expanding IT industry in Ireland, the well-paid and vacant positions which fill the careers and appointments pages of the Dublin newspapers are not suited to the skills of most unemployed people, particularly the long-term unemployed.

The Irish labour market has a significant shortage of people with high-end IT skills and a significant surplus of unskilled unemployed people who want to work in challenging and rewarding employment. Irish IT firms have a poor record of training employees, in large part because they recruit directly from third-level institutions which adjust and develop programmes according to the needs of industry. Yet there are no training programmes for high-end IT skills in third-sector institutions designed for unemployed people or others without the means to enter third-level education.

In Ballymun, more than six thousand people are registered with the Ballymun Job Centre as looking for work, but only a handful are registered in regular FAS training courses in the area and in the community access program at Dublin City University, a stone's-throw from Ballymun. Yet in the space of two years, the Ballymun Job Centre was able to pilot a training project, called Tramlines, in high-end professional IT certifications for long term unemployed people which produced 25 qualified graduates, design and run another program with a local VEC which produced another 34 graduates, and see their training program mainstreamed in the VEC with an intake of dozens of new applicants for the current year. The graduates are being hired by employers in the IT field. Tramlines is an EMPLOYMENT-Integra project.

In addition to the Ballymun project, other community-based programs to create new employment opportunities in the IT field for people from disadvantaged communities include the high-end training offered by the CITI (Clondalkin Information Technology Initiative) in Dublin (an EMPLOYMENT-Youthstart project), and a project similar to Ballymun's Tramlines beginning in the Dundalk Partnership.

Examples of technology training programs to skill-up marginalised groups for work in established IT production sectors include the Women on Air project in Galway, discussed in the previous chapter, an EMPLOYMENT-NOW project which has developed training initiatives for women in radio broadcasting.

Another is the Advance Network coordinated by the Nerve Centre in Derry, a transnational network of community-based organisations offering training in multimedia, Internet technologies, media technologies and sound recording to target groups including the unemployed and members of disadvantaged communities. Advance is funded by EMPLOYMENT-Integra; their Web site showcases their work.

These community-based initiatives are examples of how a pro-active approach can serve the people who have in the past been failed by mainstream education and training

structures. These initiatives could serve as models for a national policy which encourages mainstream education and training institutions to seriously consider the needs of the unemployed and socially excluded when developing high-quality, high-end IT courses to meet the needs of industry.

Using the Internet for organised community and voluntary work

It is significant that while an early "information society" EU policy document (3) recognised the critical role of community and voluntary organisations in the design, development and implementation of new ICTs, later EU and Irish policy documents have downplayed or ignored the vital role of community and voluntary organisations in society and the importance of supporting their use of ICTs.

This lack of recognition is at odds with other policy statements, notably the recent Irish government Green Paper on community and voluntary activity, which states that:

"*An active voluntary and community sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society, provides opportunities for the development of decentralised institutional administrative structure and fosters a climate in which innovative solutions to complex social problems and enhancement of quality of life can be pursued and realised.*" (4)

The recognition of the vital and unique role of community and voluntary organisations is the context for the second proposed response to social exclusion and disadvantage in the "information society": encouraging the strategic use of the Internet by community and voluntary organisations.

The Internet, the digital network which serves as the backbone of the "information society," allows its users to access, publish and exchange information locally or globally via services ranging from email to the WorldWide Web. The Internet has been applied successfully to the work of private and public organisations - for example businesses and governments use email to save on long-distance fax and telephone charges and make information available to the public via the WorldWide Web - and many community and voluntary organisations are also using these technologies to similar advantage in their work to tackle social disadvantage.

Examples from the case studies on King's Deli, Women on Air, and Ceoltoir in the previous chapter include using email to keep in touch with and transfer information between organisations, such as transnational partners and the EMPLOYMENT national support structure, using the Web to access information on similar projects or to do other project research, and making a Web site available for global access of information about their projects.

However, recent research on the use of the Internet by community and voluntary organisations in Ireland has found that many wanting to use the technology are experiencing significant barriers and difficulties. (5) The EMPLOYMENT case studies identified some of these difficulties. In addition to cost barriers, community and

voluntary organisations often lack reliable and affordable technical support and training, especially outside the urban centres.

A prime example of an initiative to encourage and support the use of ICTs by community and voluntary organisations is the EMPLOYMENT IT strategy. This strategy, outlined in a previous chapter, includes resourcing EMPLOYMENT projects to equip themselves with appropriate IT, training them to communicate electronically, and providing an EMPLOYMENT Web site which acts as a forum for information-sharing.

Aside from its online activities, a notable feature of the EMPLOYMENT IT strategy is ongoing promotion of the EMPLOYMENT Web site off-line - through personal letters and articles in publications - to key stakeholders including statutory bodies, VECs and partnership companies. This type of promotion encourages these stakeholders, many of whom are slow on the uptake of new ICTs, to take a more active interest in using the Internet to communicate with community and voluntary organisations. It also encourages these stakeholders to view the EMPLOYMENT projects on the Web site as dynamic and forward-looking models of an innovative use of IT.

Other examples of initiatives to encourage and support the use of the Internet by community and voluntary organisations include community-based Internet service providers, such as the Community Information Network Northern Ireland (CINNI) in Belfast, and both AONOD/ARENA and Connect-Ireland in Dublin, the latter offering the least expensive subscription for an Internet Service Provider in the Republic.

Of particular importance are initiatives which, similar to the EMPLOYMENT IT strategy, support the strengthening and expansion of existing networks and alliances of organisations working with socially excluded and disadvantaged groups. An example is the "Women Talking" project run by the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) in Belfast which offers computer support to women's groups in the North and border counties and support for a pilot group of organisations communicating through an Internet mailing list.

Supporting ICT use in disadvantaged communities

Historically, information and communication technologies have been used most effectively by the best resourced, most politically skilled and articulate members of society, and it would appear that the use of new ICTs is following the same pattern. However, the two types of initiatives just discussed - creating new opportunities in the IT labour market and using ICTs for organised community and voluntary work - can have the spin-off effect of making information and communication technologies more accessible in disadvantaged communities.

People from disadvantaged communities who learn how to use ICTs and gain access to them in employment can pass on their knowledge, skills and enthusiasm to family members and friends, and by way of example can encourage other community members

to use ICTs. Similarly, community and voluntary organisations skilled in the use of ICTs can pass on the skills to members, volunteers and clients.

This transfer of technology and skills does not necessarily occur easily, especially for the most disadvantaged members of society, as suggested by the case study of the King's Deli EMPLOYMENT-Horizon project in the previous chapter. Kings Deli provides training and employment to adults with an intellectual disability. While the project management was able to access and use email and the Web in its work, the target group of clients were not able to use ICTs. The case study concluded with a suggestion that a training course in ICTs should be developed for this target group - a good follow-on project to make new ICTs accessible to this particular community.

A welcome development is that falling prices and widespread interest have contributed to making the Internet, multimedia, and other new ICTs more available and affordable to increasing numbers of people from marginalised groups and disadvantaged communities. However, big questions remain regarding whether the socially excluded and marginalised will have the resources needed to use these technologies in meaningful ways.

An important issue often sidelined in social policy statements on the "information society" is the difference between information and cultural *consumers* and *producers*. The "information society" should offer something more to citizens than increased consumption of commercial television productions or computer game titles. At issue is whether the "information society" can offer people from disadvantaged communities an opportunity to produce and distribute information, cultural productions, and communications reflecting their own visions of the world.

The recent INSINC report from the UK on social inclusion in the information society highlights a statement made by the director of a North Carolina network of community and voluntary organisations, Ncexchange: "The key issue is not the technology and what it can do, but the needs of communities and how the technology can be used strategically to meet those needs." (7)

In this context, EMPLOYMENT initiatives and other initiatives which use ICTs to develop the capacities of communities are particularly relevant. An example given in the Ceoltoir case study in the previous chapter is the Ceoltoir Web site, which will include photographs of project participants and personal details, but most significantly, a sound clip or midi file with a sample of their own music. Sharing music through the Web is an innovative way to develop the capacity of communities because it creates a dynamic by which community members can interact with new ways of understanding their world.

Another example is the Irish Lesbian News Page, a web site established and maintained by LEA/NOW (Lesbian Education and Awareness, an EMPLOYMENT-NOW initiative). The Web page provides information to Irish lesbians and is a linking mechanism between lesbians nationally. Information on the page explains that LEA/NOW decided on a Web page because it provided "a safe and confidential way to access information (depending,

of course on access to the technology) - when you use the page there will be no record of who you are or where you logged on to the service."

Participating in public policy making

Innovative EMPLOYMENT initiatives using IT in novel ways can play an important role by way of example in developing policy on the "information society" and other policy areas. In fact, developing policy is the key role of the EMPLOYMENT Initiative, given the limitations of its budget against the scale of the problem of social exclusion. The EMPLOYMENT 1996 Annual Report makes clear that its real value and potential: "is to act as a laboratory for testing social and economic policy by piloting and evaluating actions prior to their transfer to the mainstream."

As a current example of this transfer to policy, the NESF - the National Economic and Social Forum, which will be placed on a statutory basis with the specific brief to monitor initiatives undertaken by the social partners with regard to social exclusion and unemployment - recently issued a report highlighting the EMPLOYMENT-Integra Tramlines IT training project as an example of a tailored training initiative to address long-term unemployment. In their report, the NESF suggested that this approach to training can be mainstreamed in national labour market policy. (6)

However, EMPLOYMENT initiatives, and community and voluntary organisations in general, can do more than develop innovative programs which serve as models for policy - they can be active makers of policy. The policy-maker role is especially significant for the developing information and communication technologies.

The 1980 MacBride Commission report for the United Nations - Many Voices, One World - included a remark by Kurt Waldheim which is particularly relevant today: "Failure to assert the primacy of policy over technology is an alarming and increasingly dangerous phenomenon in the modern world."

The EU and Irish "information society" social policy documents mentioned in this chapter take a deterministic approach to technology - a perspective which assumes that new information and communication technology is inevitable and we just have to make the best of it, with the best in this case invariably being what's best for industry.

On the contrary, technology is not something which just happens, develops naturally, or is inevitable - its development and use is shaped by social forces and social actors which always have political agendas. In this context, it is vitally important that social actors representing the socially excluded and disadvantaged take a lead role in public policy making on the "information society."

An example of this kind of initiative was the recent conference in Galway organised by the Women on Air (EMPLOYMENT-NOW) initiative to launch a national study exploring women's under-representation in broadcasting. The "Breaking Glass Walls" conference was an opportunity for policy makers, programme participants, academics and

practitioners to share information, ideas, and strategies on moving women to a more central role in the broadcasting and independent radio sector in Ireland.

Another example is the planned activity of the EMPLOYMENT strategy for the coming year, in particular the research into the needs of EMPLOYMENT projects regarding IT use and training, and the organisation of a national seminar in the Autumn of 1998 on the role of IT in community sector responses to exclusion. The plan is that the outcomes of both activities will feed into national policy on the "information society."

Organisations representing the socially excluded are beginning to take a more active part in developing Ireland's "information society" policy. When the Irish Information Society Steering Committee was set up in early 1996, it had no representation from the community and voluntary sector. After a year of lobbying by the sector, the newly formed Irish Information Society Commission had one member from the sector on board - the organisation working on disability policy and research, the Centre for Independent Living. Significantly, a committee structure reporting to the Commission now includes a Government Services and Social Inclusion Advisory Group, with representation from the EMPLOYMENT Youthstart National Support Structure, the National Youth Council of Ireland, as well as representatives from government and the community and voluntary sector, notably Aontas and the Forum for People with Disabilities.

Conclusions, resources and notes

This chapter argues that the "information society" will remain a socially and economically divided society if meeting the needs of industry and having the market regulate resources remain the prime concerns of makers of policy on the "information society."

A central issue regarding social disadvantage in the "information society" is whether socially marginalised groups and people from disadvantaged communities have access to secure well-paid employment using the new information and communication technologies. Among the initiatives highlighted which encourage social inclusion in the "information society" are community-based training for the unemployed and socially excluded toward high-level jobs in the IT sector, support for the use of the new communication and information technologies for organised community and voluntary work, diffusion of the technologies in socially disadvantaged communities, and policy-making activities by those working with the socially disadvantaged.

It is important to note that although the "information society" policies which have emerged to date from the EU and the Irish government have not yet targeted significant actions for increasing social inclusion, they have clearly recognised that social exclusion is a danger which needs to be addressed.

There is also, on the part of some private sector players in the IT industry, an interest to increase social inclusion and access to the information and communications

infrastructure. Key computer, telecommunications and media companies have demonstrated a commitment in this area.

These initiatives and demonstrations of interest and commitment need to be nurtured, supported and encouraged. Specifically, we need to continue developing a framework which will move socially excluded groups and people from disadvantaged communities into a more central and active role in our collective future.

Notes
1. Quote from p. 5 of: Living and Working in the Information Society: People First. Green Paper, European Commission, October 1996. Paraphrased on p. 3 of: Ireland, Information Society Ireland: Strategy for Action, Forfas, December 1996.

2. The debate is analysed extensively in Frank Webster's 1995 book, Theories of the Information Society. For an Irish perspective, see the special issue on the "information society" of the Economic and Social Review, Vol.28, No.3, July 1997.

3. European Commission (1996), Building the Information Society for Us All: First Reflections of the High Level Group of Experts. Brussels: European Commission. January, p. 34.

4. Department of Social Welfare (1997). Supporting Voluntary Activity: A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and its Relationship with the State, Dublin: Stationary Office, p. 24.

5. From early 1998, the report of the research project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age, will be available from the School of Communications, Dublin City University.

6. The NESF report is: Partnership 2000: Targeted Employment and Training Measures (Forum Opinion No. 2) November 1997.

7. The National Working Party on Social Inclusion (INSINC) is a collaboration of representatives from the community and voluntary sector, universities, local government and industry in the UK. The citation is from page 7 of The Net Result: Social Inclusion in the Information Society (1997), published by the Community Development Foundation and IBM.