

TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE INFORMATION SOCIETY IN EUROPE

The Role of Voluntary Organisations

IST Study Report
October 2001



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Models Research

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Executive Summary

This report is the outcome of a study on how voluntary organisations can encourage a more inclusive information society in Europe.

Voluntary organisations across Europe contribute to employment creation, provide a wide range of information and services, and encourage disadvantaged groups to be more active members of society and the economy. Voluntary organisations can also foster a more inclusive information society. The study explores this potential role and suggests ways to support and develop it through future policy and research.

The study begins by defining its terms. "*Voluntary organisations*" are organisations in the social economy that: have some degree of formal or institutional existence, are non-profit-distributing, are independent of government and other public authorities, are managed in a disinterested manner, and are active in the public arena, contributing to some degree to the public good.

The "*information society*" refers to a society in which information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, play a central role in the lives of its citizens. The primary means of accessing the Internet is a computer. Access through other means (mobile phone, television, games console) is marginal in Europe. The central concern of the study was therefore Internet access via computers and use of computers.

The term, "*inclusive information society*," is difficult to define, in large part because little qualitative research has been conducted on this topic. The most recent quantitative research in Europe indicates that those with the lowest rates of use of the Internet are predominately: people with few formal qualifications; the unemployed; unskilled workers in insecure employment who do not have access to computers at work, especially older people, and women, who make up a disproportionately large element of the unskilled, low-paid workforce; people living in households with low incomes; people with disabilities; those living in rural and particularly isolated areas; ethnic minorities; and people experiencing disadvantage for a range of other reasons. The current study considers people from these groups to be at risk of or experiencing exclusion from the information society.

An inclusive information society is a stated policy priority for governments across Europe. The EU's *eEurope* policy initiative and IST (Information Society Technologies) research programme both emphasise that low levels of participation and inclusion in the information society increase social marginalisation by disadvantaged groups, reduce the potential for economic growth, limit innovation opportunities, and weaken social cohesion in certain parts of Europe. In addition, the digital divide will undermine the efforts of governments across Europe to provide Web-based access to public information and services.

For information society policy-makers, a crucial question is the extent to which not using the Internet is linked to an individual's concern with costs or informed personal choice, rather than being rooted in the wider issues of social disadvantage. Innovative policies and strategies may be necessary to bring the tens of millions of European citizens without the knowledge, skills or confidence to use the Internet to a point where they can make an informed decision about the role it could play in their lives. Voluntary organisations may have a key role to play in these policies and strategies.

The study reviewed recent research and conducted new qualitative research - 23 in-depth interviews with key informants across Europe with expertise in voluntary organisations and the information society. This report is an exploratory analysis of how voluntary organisations can foster a more inclusive information society. The study cannot quantify the extent of this activity but does suggest ways that the number of voluntary organisations doing this work could be increased and their work improved.

Analysis is presented in four thematic chapters: training and employment in the information society, democratic participation and online content, social capital and participation for all, and funding and partnerships. These chapters are briefly summarised below.

Training and employment in the information society

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in facilitating training and employment in the information society?

Voluntary organisations are an important source of employment across Europe. They can provide IT training to their staff, volunteers and clients, although the level of training can vary considerably among organisations. People experiencing disadvantage can acquire computer skills through voluntary activities.

Voluntary organisations are **providing training in basic computer skills** to people experiencing disadvantage, particularly to individuals who do not use state-funded facilities and those who need training targeted to their particular needs. Basic computer training can also be introduced to disadvantaged groups as part of overall provision by voluntary organisations.

Voluntary organisations are **providing ICT (information and communication technology) training aimed at sustainable employment for disadvantaged groups**, although such initiatives are rare. They require substantial financing, resources and facilities as well as highly-skilled support and technical staff.

Democratic participation and online content

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in facilitating democratic participation in the information society and the production of online content?

Voluntary organisations are **supporting the political process** by using the Internet to interact with government on behalf of the disadvantaged groups they work with or represent. The content on many government Web sites is not directly accessible to people experiencing disadvantage, and voluntary organisations can mediate this content to make it more accessible and relevant.

Voluntary organisations are using the Internet to **strengthen civil society** - to build the capacity of civil society organisations and networks of organisations working towards social inclusion. However many restraints - primarily related to the low incomes of voluntary organisations - can limit the effective use of ICTs by voluntary organisations.

Voluntary organisations are also using computers and the Internet to **expand online content and the public sphere** - by producing community media and other content online that responds to the specific needs of people experiencing disadvantage, or introduces their views and voices into a wider public sphere. Significant restraints to this work include lack of financial resources and the low levels of Internet use in disadvantaged communities.

Social capital and participation for all

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in increasing social capital and participation for all in the information society?

Voluntary organisations are **increasing awareness of ICTs** among people experiencing disadvantage in Europe, especially in areas where they are the primary providers of information and services to disadvantaged groups. They can also build trust in ICTs by using computer applications that are credible, accessible and affordable and meet the specific needs of people experiencing disadvantage.

Voluntary organisations are operating community-based centres for computer and Internet access and other Internet-based support and networks for disadvantaged groups. These centres can have social capital value by **engendering a feeling of community** and supporting the creation of peer support networks among people experiencing disadvantage.

Funding and partnerships

Securing adequate funding and building successful partnerships for ICT projects are significant challenges for voluntary organisations. In many regions of Europe, voluntary organisations provide essential public services without adequate resources for this work. Their ICT projects are often funded by the public sector and are difficult if not impossible to maintain without this funding. Few of their ICT projects are funded by the private sector, in contrast to the US where commercial organisations are often involved in funding ICT projects for disadvantaged groups. Funding mechanism for ICT projects by voluntary organisations will need significant improvement.

The role of voluntary organisations

The study found that voluntary organisations do play an important role in fostering a more inclusive information society in Europe. The extent of this activity cannot be quantified - some but obviously not all voluntary organisations are engaged in it.

Three key roles played by voluntary organisations were identified: Champion, Mediator, and Supporter. The study suggests ways that the number of voluntary organisations playing these roles could be increased.

Voluntary organisations across Europe can take on one, two, or all three roles, to various degrees, depending on the aims of the organisations, the specific social, cultural and political contexts of their work, the needs of the groups and communities they serve and represent, and the dynamic between their organisations and local and national authorities and government.

Champions are voluntary organisations delivering support and services aimed at encouraging access and effective use of ICTs by people experiencing disadvantage. This can also involve providing content on the Internet that meets the needs of disadvantaged groups and also encouraging disadvantaged groups to produce content on the Internet themselves.

Mediators are voluntary organisations acting as front-line conduits between disadvantaged groups and ICTs. They look for opportunities to encourage people experiencing disadvantage to use computers and the Internet or make some of the benefits available to them. They mediate online content about government information and services, putting it into contexts that are relevant for the disadvantaged groups they work with.

Supporters are voluntary organisations that support the use of ICTs by disadvantaged groups as a natural extension of their overall work with these groups. Supporters play this role primarily through their social capital function - providing a sense of trust and common purpose, in this case in the use of computers and the Internet. Voluntary

organisations can be supporters even if their own use of computers and the Internet is not sophisticated or extensive.

Implications for voluntary organisations

Voluntary organisations playing the champion role need to increase their sharing of information and experiences with other champions on a national, European and international level. Information sharing will help improve the quality of their programmes and services aimed at social inclusion in the information society.

The Web page for the study: www.models-research.ie/projects/vsiis.html is a useful starting point and focus for this networking.

Champions need to be reviewing and evaluating their ICT projects and programmes on an ongoing basis to ensure they are meeting the needs of the target disadvantaged groups. Evaluation will involve seeking the views and experiences of the users, learners and participants in the programmes.

Champions need to be continually improving information and communications processes within their organisations, including training and supports for staff and volunteers.

Champions could be more actively lobbying for increased recognition of their role in policy aimed at improving inclusion in the information society. This would involve participating on committees and processes to develop more inclusive policies in this area.

Implications for national-level information society policies

Voluntary organisations work in specific social, cultural and political contexts in every region of Europe. The study suggests that voluntary organisations have a vital role to play in a more inclusive information society, and that the task of national level policy should be to facilitate and develop this role wherever possible.

Developing the champion role centres on policies to support innovative programmes and projects delivered by voluntary organisations to increase the use of ICTs by people experiencing disadvantage. Facilitating the champion role also involves recognising the expertise of the voluntary organisations that are champions with ICTs and disadvantaged groups, and using that expertise when developing policies on an inclusive information society.

Developing the mediator role centres on policies for building strong communication and information networks with the voluntary sector and using these networks to make information available on services, programmes and opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage. It also involves soliciting feedback from voluntary organisations on the usefulness and relevance of government information online, and responding to the feedback offered.

Developing the supporter role centres on policies for building ICT capacity within voluntary organisations. This involves developing funding mechanisms and programmes to increase the use of computers and the Internet by voluntary organisations.

Implications for national level information society research

National level research is needed to understand and develop the role played by voluntary organisations in an inclusive information society.

The first priority is to conduct a mapping survey to identify the voluntary organisations playing the champion role and qualitative research to identify ways to overcome the restraints and barriers to their work. Research should include qualitative evaluation of their projects, with an aim to improving the quality and effectiveness of the project outcomes, including impacts on social networks, community development and confidence-building.

The next priority is to explore the mediator role, through qualitative research to improve the process by which these voluntary organisations act to mediate government content online to people experiencing disadvantage. This would include improving the mechanisms for designing and delivering government services and online content for disadvantaged groups.

A further stage of research is to explore the supporter role, particularly to understand the social capital function of voluntary organisations in increasing awareness and trust in information technologies by people experiencing disadvantage and more widely in disadvantaged communities.

Implications for EU-level information society policy

The three roles identified by the study - champions, mediators and supporters - imply that voluntary organisations can be encouraged to contribute in a range of ways to a more inclusive information society in Europe.

Voluntary organisations should be recognised and included in *eEurope* policy for their role in fostering a more inclusive information society. There are implications for elements of two core objectives of *eEurope*: Investing in people and skills, and stimulating the use of the Internet. Elements with a role for voluntary organisations include: working in the knowledge-based economy, government online, and participation for all in the knowledge-based economy.

In the area of **working in the knowledge-based economy:**

- *An existing action in eEurope is to give the labour force the chance to become digitally literate through life-long learning.* Voluntary organisations are an important source of employment across Europe and should be recognised as contributors to *eEurope* targets in this area.
- *An existing action in eEurope is to significantly increase information technology training places and courses using European Union funds where appropriate.* Voluntary organisations are delivering ICT training programmes for people experiencing disadvantage, some of which are aimed at sustainable employment in the information society. These initiatives should be recognised and encouraged with *eEurope* targets.
- *An existing action in eEurope is to set up public Internet access points in public spaces and establish multi-media telecentres in all communities providing access to training and e-work facilities, where appropriate using Structural Funds.* Voluntary organisations are participating in coordinated local approaches to delivering computer training to people experiencing disadvantage and may themselves be delivering training. This work should be acknowledged and encouraged with *eEurope* targets.

In the area of **government online:**

- *An existing action in eEurope is to make essential public data available online including legal, administrative, cultural, environmental and traffic information.* Government information online for people experiencing disadvantage needs to be improved. Voluntary organisations are mediating government content online to meet the particular needs of people experiencing disadvantage. This mediation work should be recognised, supported and developed with *eEurope* targets.
- *An existing action in eEurope is to ensure that generalised electronic access to main basic public services exists in Member States.* Voluntary organisations are playing an important role in fostering the use of computers, the Internet, and government information and services online by people experiencing disadvantage. This role should be recognised, supported and developed with *eEurope* targets.

In the area of **participation for all in the knowledge-based economy:**

- *The following new action could be added to eEurope: Support and promote efforts by voluntary organisations to build their capacity to use ICTs.* Voluntary organisations are supporting computer and Internet use among disadvantaged groups as an extension of their work with these groups; they need significant capacity-building in ICTs to continue and expand this work. This should be acknowledged and encouraged with *eEurope* targets.

On a broader level, outside the *eEurope Initiative*, the study identified implications for an EU-level policy response in other areas:

- The campaign for "Internet rights" for civil society is developing support across Europe. Key aspects of the Internet Rights campaign are: the right to communicate; the right to free speech and debate on matters of public interest; protection of privacy; open democratic processes in setting Internet standards; and building civil society alliances for cyberspace.
- The need to encourage companies to take a more pro-active role in supporting voluntary sector efforts towards an inclusive information society. This area is perhaps best addressed in the ongoing efforts already underway to encourage companies to show greater social responsibility alongside profits when making business decisions.
- Continuing to encourage the use of European Union funds for ICT projects developed and delivered by voluntary organisations. The European Social Fund (ESF) is an important source of support for the co-financing of social inclusion initiatives. Member States can use the ESF to help build up the capacity of voluntary organisations working with disadvantaged groups.
- Encouraging the use of Community Initiative funding for these projects. Opportunities exist in particular under the EQUAL Initiative (promoting new ways of tackling exclusion, discrimination and inequality in the labour market), and also the LEADER+ Initiative (promoting rural development through local action initiatives) and the URBAN Initiative (encouraging the economic and social regeneration of towns, cities and suburbs in crisis).

Implications for EU-level research

Few EU-level research projects are investigating the qualitative experiences and needs of people experiencing disadvantage in the information society. More research in this area is vital to developing future policy, programmes and applications for a more inclusive information society. In addition, future evaluations of EU-funded research should include qualitative exploration of the impacts of these projects on people experiencing disadvantage.

The study highlights specific areas where EU-level research would be useful for developing policy and programmes on an inclusive information society.

In the area of **training and employment in the information society**, research aimed at:

- Exploring how people from disadvantaged groups may acquire ICT skills through volunteer activities with voluntary organisations.
- Improving the capacity of voluntary organisations to deliver ICT training to people experiencing disadvantage.

In the area of **democratic participation and online content**, research aimed at:

- Improving the production and distribution of community media and other digitalised content by and for disadvantaged groups.
- Developing indicators of democratic participation online and methodologies for research in this area.
- Improving the participation in online democratic processes of disadvantaged groups.
- Exploring the implications of various models of Internet communications between citizens experiencing disadvantage and political representatives and the implications for democracy and the public sphere on European level.
- Exploring how voluntary organisations can use ICTs to improve their capacity to work with disadvantaged groups.
- Understanding the challenges facing voluntary organisations in their attempts to make information available on the Internet.
- Exploring how voluntary organisations contribute to improving the quality of government information online, and how the collaboration of voluntary organisations and governments may be improved.

In the area of **social capital and participation for all**, research aimed at:

- Developing indicators of social capital and methodologies for research on ICTs and social capital in disadvantaged communities.

In the area of **funding and partnerships**, research aimed at:

- Understanding how public funding mechanisms at national and European level may be improved for voluntary organisations working on projects aimed at a more inclusive information society.
- Developing models of partnerships involving voluntary organisations and commercial organisations for projects aimed at a more inclusive information society.

The Sixth Framework Programme of the European Community for research will begin in 2002 (European Commission, 2001a). The research areas above could be integrated with three key priority areas of the Sixth Framework Programme: Policy-oriented research (included under Anticipating the EU's scientific and technological needs); Information Society technologies; and Citizens and governance in the European knowledge-based society. This implies also that voluntary organisations across Europe should be active as partners and user groups in Sixth Framework Programme research projects.

An Inclusive Society in Europe

Introduction

This study explores the question: What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in encouraging a more inclusive information society in Europe?

An inclusive information society is a stated policy priority for governments across Europe. The EU's *eEurope* policy initiative and IST (Information Society Technologies) research programme both emphasise that low levels of participation and inclusion in the information society increase social marginalisation by disadvantaged groups, reduce the potential for economic growth, limit innovation opportunities, and weaken social cohesion in certain parts of Europe.

In addition, the digital divide will undermine the efforts of governments across Europe to provide Web-based access to public information and services. Europeans without Internet access and the skills or motivation to negotiate a Web page are often those most in need of the public information and services available online.

For information society policy-makers, a crucial question is the extent to which not using the Internet is linked to an individual's concern with costs or informed personal choice, rather than being rooted in the wider issues of social disadvantage. Innovative policies and strategies may be necessary to bring the tens of millions of European citizens without the knowledge, skills or confidence to use the Internet to a point where they can make an informed decision about the role it could play in their lives. Voluntary organisations may have a key role to play in these policies and strategies.

The European Commission (1997b) has recognised that voluntary organisations across Europe contribute to employment creation, provide a wide range of services, and encourage people experiencing disadvantage - such as the unemployed, disadvantaged women, disadvantaged older people, disabled people, and other disadvantaged groups - to play a more active role in society and the economy. More recently, the Commission (2000a) made a commitment to include voluntary organisations in Member States in the design, implementation and follow-up of the programme to combat social exclusion.

EU Information Society Policy Has Recognised Voluntary Organisations

In 1995, the European Commission established the High Level Expert Group to analyse the information society's social dimensions. Their final report (1997a) recognised a role for voluntary organisations in increasing social participation. A report recommendation stated: "The various possibilities for increasing the rate of development and adoption of applications of ICTs to increase social participation and to improve quality of life should be examined in more detail and actively pursued. In particular, attention should focus on provision or adaptation in the areas where the market is unlikely to meet needs. The involvement of the target groups in the design, development and implementation of technologies is critical, as is the participation by voluntary bodies and NGOs representing such groups."

However, at Community level, there is currently little understanding of the role voluntary organisations play in fostering a more inclusive information society in Europe. Early EU policy documents on the information society recognised a role for voluntary organisations (European Commission, 1997a). The most recent EU-level information society policy, the *eEurope* Initiative, does not explicitly recognise or articulate this role. A key task of the study has been to explore if such a role does or could exist for voluntary organisations.

Defining Our Terms

The terms "*information society*" "*voluntary organisations*," and "*inclusive information society*," are defined below.

There is widespread agreement that "*information society*" refers to a society in which information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, play a central role in the lives of its citizens. The primary means of accessing the Internet is a computer. Access through other means (mobile phone, television, games console) is marginal in Europe. The central concern of the study was therefore Internet access via computers and use of computers.

"There Are Few Natural Ways for People With Disabilities to Get in Contact with the Technology"

"A number of problems are facing the people we work with who want to get IT skills. Most can't afford to buy a computer because they are not working and don't have an income. It's hard for them to create a contact with the IT world, because often people get access to IT through work but these people are unemployed. They are isolated. Technology access is segregated in Sweden. Computers are available in public spaces such as libraries but if you need adjustments or technical aids, you can't get those in the public spaces. If you are disabled you don't use a computer as much as the general population. There are few natural ways to get in contact with the technology."

[Quote from the interviews]

The term, "*inclusive information society*," is challenging to define, in large part because little qualitative research has been conducted in Europe on this topic. The term does not imply a simplistic and reductive model of those who are "in" the information society and those who are "out." Social inclusion in the information society is rooted in wider social, economic and cultural forces and is thus a comprehensive, multidimensional and dynamic process.

Recent analysis of quantitative data on the digital divide - in the OECD (OECD, 2001a; Hargittai, 1999), in Europe (European Commission, 2001c; Norris, 2000), in the US (USDoc 2000b and 1999), as well as reports from Britain (Timmins, 2000; Kelso and Adams, 2000) and Ireland (O'Donnell, 2000a) - highlight a consistent range of factors associated with levels of Internet use. The research clearly shows that an inclusive information society is much more complex than physical access to Internet-linked computers.

The research indicates that the most eager users of the Internet have higher incomes and levels of formal education than the rest of the population. Needless to

"All That's Needed Is the Right, Appropriate Context"

"I've got fed up with people exclaiming in wild terms about the fact that, for example, older people can surf the net! Of course they can. All that's needed is the right, appropriate context - everyone can find some value from exploiting this technology. We are categorising people by age, race, gender, etc. because it's easier. People who grow up in a context where they are not involved in decision-making processes that affect them are less likely to grab this technology and exploit it. I think that's a fundamental problem of exclusion because people go through their childhood, their family life, their school life, into work life without being consulted about what happens to them. It's easy to point to the technology and point to those people and say - listen this can help you - but if you haven't got the habit of being consulted and participating in things, you may not have the temperament to exploit the technology at all." [Quote from the interviews]

say, the earliest adopters of the Internet are almost always employed or living in households with higher than average incomes.

On the other hand, those with the lowest rates of use of the Internet are predominately: people with few formal qualifications; the unemployed; unskilled workers in insecure employment who do not have access to computers at work, especially older people, and women, who make up a disproportionately large element of the unskilled, low-paid workforce; people living in households with low incomes; people with disabilities; those living in rural and particularly isolated areas; ethnic minorities; and people experiencing disadvantage for a range of other reasons. People from these groups are considered in our study to be those at risk of or experiencing exclusion from the information society.

A recent European Commission document on eInclusion (European Commission, 2001c) underlines that the digital divide in Europe is cumulative. The document states that: *"The Information Society still has multiple access gaps - across Member States and regions as well as by gender, age, income, employment and education. Digital exclusion is frequently cumulative, adding to other social disadvantages. The*

number of Internet users is, in relative terms, increasing across all disadvantaged socio-economic categories. However, in absolute terms the gaps in Internet penetration - between men and women, employed and unemployed, high and low-income, high and low-skilled, old and young - have grown over the last months."

The term "*voluntary organisation*" is also a challenge to define. There is no universally-accepted definition and researchers studying these organisations employ a bewildering array of terms to describe them. In the literature review, these included: voluntary organisations, community groups, civil society organisations, citizens organisations, charities, associations, social service organisations, social economy organisations, third sector organisations, non-profit (or not-for-profit) organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activist groups, special interest groups... and others.

The current study has adopted the European Commission's definition of the term "*voluntary organisation*" in its 1997 study, that is, organisations in the social economy that: have some degree of formal or institutional existence, are non-profit-distributing, are independent of government and other public authorities, are managed in a disinterested manner,

How Many Voluntary Organisations In Europe?

Reliable statistics on voluntary organisations are rare - there is no agreed definition of "voluntary organisation" and few researchers or statistics agencies are concerned with them. Voluntary organisations are an important part of European society and the economy. The European Commission's survey of voluntary organisations (1997b) found that their number in Europe has increased significantly since the Second World War and that growth in the sector has been "explosive" in the previous decade. The EC study estimates that somewhere between a third and half the population of the European Union are members of voluntary organisations, or approximately 100 million people. In 1993, the voluntary sector employed about 1 million people in Germany, 900,000 in the UK, 800,000 in France, and 400,000 in Italy; operating expenditures of voluntary organisations as a percentage of GNP ranged from 4.8 percent in the UK to 2 percent in Italy. A more recent study (Dacheux, 2000) states that there are currently 700,000 voluntary organisations ("associations") in France and more than two million in the European Union as a whole.

and are active in the public arena, contributing to some degree to the public good.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The study focused on the potential role that voluntary organisations in Europe play in fostering computer and Internet use by the groups who have traditionally low rates of use of these technologies. The specific research objectives were:

- To review published research on voluntary organisations and an inclusive information society in Europe and North America and identify thematic areas for the study
- To identify researchers and practitioners in this area in at least five European countries
- To conduct in-depth interviews with key informants to gather qualitative data about the thematic areas identified
- To develop a consolidated European analysis of the potential role of voluntary organisations in fostering a more inclusive information society in Europe
- To identify implications for future Community information society policy, in particular the *eEurope* Initiative, and to identify implications for future Community research, in particular the IST

Programme (the European Commission's Research Programme on Information Society Technologies)

The study was conducted in 2001 by Models Research, an independent company in Ireland specialising in research on social aspects of the information society. The study included reviewing published literature and conducting qualitative research.

The first stage was reviewing literature on voluntary organisations and an inclusive information society. The focus was research published in peer-reviewed journals in English and French. After extensive searches of databases of peer-reviewed journals, databases of major libraries in Britain and France, Web sources, as well as the EC's Cordis research database, reports and articles were selected and reviewed that touched

on the situation in many countries in Europe -including Belgium, Britain, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden - and Canada and the United States. Documents from the European Commission and other European Institutions were reviewed, as well as information society policies from a sample of EU Member States: Finland, France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The documents used in the study are listed in the References section at the end of this report.

The second stage was interviews with key informants with expertise on the topic of voluntary organisations, social inclusion, and ICTs or the information society. Twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants in five countries representing the different typologies of European nations. The key informants were selected for their expertise in the research topic. Some are recognised national experts and others are known on a local or regional level. The key informants were chosen through consultations with other experts in the field, by references from published literature, and through extensive Web searches of projects involving voluntary organisations and an inclusive information society.

The 23 key informants interviewed for the study are based in the following countries: Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Spain (interviews were conducted in Spanish and

Catalan), Sweden, and the United Kingdom (including Britain, Northern Ireland and Scotland). Almost half the respondents were women and all had experience with research or projects aimed at fostering the use of ICTs by one or more of the following groups: people with low literacy skills and little formal education; people on low income or living in poverty; the unemployed or those in insecure employment; disadvantaged women; older people; people with disabilities; young people without qualifications; people living in isolated areas; and immigrants. Informants also included several working with environmental organisations.

Who Was Interviewed For The Study?

In-depth interviews were conducted with 23 key informants across Europe, including researchers and practitioners - primarily people working with voluntary organisations, ICTs, and the groups experiencing disadvantage in the information society. These groups included: people with few formal qualifications; the unemployed; unskilled workers in insecure employment who do not have access to computers at work, especially older people, and women, who make up a disproportionately large element of the unskilled, low-paid workforce; people living in households with low incomes; people with disabilities; those living in rural and particularly isolated areas; ethnic minorities; and people experiencing disadvantage for a range of other reasons.

Interview questions were developed from themes identified in the literature review and were explored through in-depth interviews. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysis included multiple readings of the transcripts to identify the potential role of voluntary organisations in encouraging a more inclusive information society. The study's final stage was analysing the materials to generate suggestions for future policy and research on an inclusive information society.

The study cannot quantify the extent of voluntary organisations' activities in encouraging a more inclusive information society in Europe. The research was exploratory, focusing on qualitative experiences of voluntary organisations engaged in these activities. The study findings suggest ways that the number of voluntary organisations doing this work could be increased and their work improved.

National Information Society Policies

This section briefly reviews information society policies in a sample of four European nations - Finland, France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom - looking specifically at the role of voluntary organisations in these policies. The review was facilitated by the ESIS Report (2000) which identified key policy documents. This overview is intended to introduce the variety of national information society policies in Europe.

The voluntary sector's role varies considerably in the different social, political and cultural contexts of the European nations. A recent publication from the Economic and Social Committee (Faure and Holzer, 2000) outlines different roles welfare organisations play in France, Germany, Finland and Portugal. To cite several examples: in Finland, the role of voluntary organisations evolved quickly in the early 1990s as the country experienced a severe economic recession and required the voluntary sector to provide essential social services; in Portugal, a pact of solidarity with the government, municipalities and small communities gives certain voluntary organisations considerable responsibilities in some local areas. A fuller scope of activities of voluntary organisations in Europe is detailed in Brian Harvey's overview of the sectors in Europe, and Eastern and Central Europe (Harvey, 1995 and 1995a).

Finland

The two key policy documents reviewed were: the strategic document for the development of the Finnish information society (SITRA, 1998), and the Information Society Advisory Board's first report to the government (ISAB, 2000).

The 1998 report sees voluntary organisations playing a role in developing public services in partnership with other sectors, specifically: developing coherent and cost-effective public services using ICTs, entailing extensive cooperation between administrative sectors, local authorities and regions, as well as between the public, private and voluntary sectors. The 2000 report does not mention voluntary organisations.

Specifically, the 1998 report states that: *"Decentralised decision-making highlights the need for management by strategies. ICT creates new opportunities for producing and distributing public services, but at the same time it entails the renewal of processes in cooperation with the private and voluntary sectors. The renewal of processes based on clients' needs is essential for improving the cost-quality ratio. Information networks also empower citizens and make for transparent public administration... The key processes in*

public services must be developed, and new action models must be sought in cooperation with the private and voluntary sectors."

France

The key policy document reviewed was *France in the information society* (France, 1999), a report articulating and expanding on the Government's action programme for the information society (PAGSI) launched the previous year.

Voluntary Organisations Are Recognised In National Information Society Policies

Many EU Member States have information society policies recognising voluntary organisations. For example, a national policy document on the information society in France (1999) states that: "The role of associations [voluntary organisations] is important when it comes to making the public aware of the issues at stake in the information society. Moreover, the use of the internet provides a wealth of possibilities for associative life."

The 1999 report outlines the Government's role of supporting and coordinating initiatives by all sectors of society. The document refers to "associations" (voluntary organisations), suggesting that they will work in partnership with other sectors. The document states that: "*Depending on what actions are implemented by public authorities, companies and associations, the emergence of the information society will be a factor for social exclusion or strengthening the social fabric.*" Further, "*Government action for the information society must be conducted in close consultation with all the socio-economic players.*"

In a section on "new forms of citizen action," the report notes that: "*petitions and calls for mobilisation are proliferating on the internet. It was on the internet that the first demonstrations rejecting the multilateral investment agreements [global free-trade accord] in France first appeared, which was, moreover, coordinated on a European level... Within associations, it is without doubt during the process of collective decision-making that the benefits of the internet are most keenly felt. The setting-up of internal forums, joint work on documents, successive versions of which are placed online and the extremely rapid publication of the minutes represent a new form of 'enhanced democracy' in which the distance between citizens (or members) and their representatives is being reduced.*"

Ireland

The key policy document reviewed was the latest report from the Information Society Commission (ISC, 2000), which is a framework for the Government's information society policy.

Community and voluntary organisations are key players in this framework, with the report stating that the structure for future information society development in Ireland includes an "*effective partnership among the public, private and community and voluntary sectors.*" Specific actions and policy directions involving the voluntary sector include:

- Generating qualitative research and analysis on social inclusion in the information society, through partnerships between industry, the universities, other research organisations and the community and voluntary sector
- Providing direct supports for programmes for the community and voluntary sector, including organisations dealing with people with disabilities, to allow them to utilise the technologies themselves, and empower their own constituencies through the use of new technology
- Supporting the community and voluntary sector to provide pertinent and useful content for their communities
- Developing IT access initiatives through partnership and integrating with the existing community and voluntary sector and support networks and local champions
- Providing government funding for community IT access centres, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector and industry
- Developing an IT support structure for the community and voluntary sector through the government department charged with providing support to the sector
- Continuing to include representation by community and voluntary organisations, and bodies representing disadvantaged individuals, on government and policy bodies dealing with the information society

United Kingdom

The key policy document reviewed was the UK Online Annual Report (UK, 2000), which describes the main government strategy - UK Online - for building the information society in the UK.

Voluntary organisations play a central role in UK Online. In its introduction, the document states that: *"the Government, industry, the voluntary sector, trades unions and consumer groups have come together to deliver UK online: a major initiative to ensure that everyone in the UK who wants it will have access to the Internet, and to make the UK one of the world's leading knowledge economies."* Specific actions and policy directions in UK Online involving voluntary organisations include:

- Working with the voluntary sector on two major research initiatives to analyse the particular constraints on IT use among the socially disadvantaged, and to use the research findings to inform policy
- Working in partnership with the private, public and voluntary sectors to roll out ICT learning centres in areas of disadvantage and encourage the development of content that communities will find useful

- Championing private and voluntary sector involvement in the delivery of electronic government services
- Ensuring that all proposals for developing new online services consider the scope for private and voluntary sector involvement
- Using a 'co-regulatory' approach to securing public policy objectives on the Internet - where Government defines the objectives to be met but asks industry and the voluntary sector to develop and implement the appropriate solutions
- Working with private and voluntary sectors, consumer groups and trade unions to develop the national campaign to get the UK online

EU Policies

At the EU institutional level, voluntary organisations often participate in developing Community policy and legislation. The European Economic and Social Committee (ESC) has evolved into the representative body of civil society organisations, including voluntary bodies, at Community level. The ESC's 1999 "Opinion on the role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe" outlined its position on how these organisations contribute to a more inclusive and democratic Europe. More recently, the ESC co-published a conference report on the contribution of welfare organisations to the development of a European civil society (Faure and Holzer, 2000).

The Communication on Promoting the Role of Voluntary Organisations and Foundations in Europe is the most comprehensive document published by the European Commission (1997) on the role of voluntary organisations in Europe. More recently, the Commission published a discussion paper on the relationship between the Commission and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (2000b). The 1997 document outlines how voluntary organisations contribute to a more inclusive society through employment creation, providing a wide range of services, and encouraging people experiencing disadvantage to play a more active role in the economy and society. The report states that voluntary organisations are key actors in ensuring an inclusive society and that "*voluntary organisations and foundations have a clear interest in being associated closely with information society developments.*"

The Social Policy Agenda (European Commission, 2000f) sees a central role for civil society and non-governmental organisations in key areas such as an improved form of governance, consolidation and strengthening of fundamental social rights, ensuring the full participation of people in social policy, and preparing for EU enlargement under conditions of balanced economic and social development. It states that "fighting social exclusion also requires a strong partnership at all levels, between public authorities, social partners, non-governmental organisations, and other interested

Voluntary Organisations Are Combatting Social Exclusion

The European Commission's recent Decision (2000a) establishing a programme of Community action to combat social exclusion underlines the role of voluntary organisations, stating that: "In designing, implementing and following up the activities under the programme account will be taken of the experience in the Member States at all relevant levels and of people exposed to poverty and social exclusion, as well as of social partners, non-governmental and voluntary organisations and other actors of the society involved in the fight against poverty and social exclusion."

parties." The Social Policy Agenda sets out to stimulate the integration of key social issues with other policy areas, including information society policy.

The European Commission's recent Decision (2000a) establishing a programme of Community action to combat social exclusion underlines the role of voluntary organisations.

An emerging role is being developed in the European Union for voluntary organisations and other civil society actors in the area of governance, as outlined in the recent Green Paper prepared by the EC's European Governance Team (2000d). The Green Paper suggests that a new constitution should guide the European Parliament, and that: "*An appropriate modern constitution would then refer not only to Parliament, formal government, and citizens but also to organisations, agents of civil society, and experts*

in the governance processes, defining their roles, rights, obligations, etc. It would also articulate and legitimise particular standards or ideal forms of governance."

EU Information Society Policy

The Bangemann Report (European Commission, 1994) marked the beginning of information society policy at EU level. The report's main focus was to urge the EU to have faith in market mechanisms as the motive power for the information society, suggesting that the widespread availability of ICTs would bring new opportunities to build a more equal and balanced society. The report spoke of job creation through partnerships of public and private sector actors, including unions and employers, but did not mention the voluntary sector as a social partner.

In 1995, the Social Affairs DG established the High Level Expert Group to widen the debate to include the information society's social dimensions. Its interim report (European Commission, 1996a) raised for the first time the concern about exclusion from the information society - specific groups mentioned were the elderly, early and "active" retired persons, low income families, the unemployed and women. The report also highlighted the particular difficulties in the information society facing illiterate people in Europe, particularly immigrants and persons with learning disabilities. The High Level Expert Group envisioned a role for voluntary organisations in addressing social inclusion in the information society. That role was articulated as a recommendation in the High Level Expert Group's final report (1997a) which stated that:

"9a, Increasing social participation: The various possibilities for increasing the rate of development and adoption of applications of ICTs to increase social participation and to improve quality of life should be examined in more detail and actively pursued. In particular, attention should focus on provision or adaptation in the areas where the market is unlikely to meet needs. The involvement of the target groups in the design, development and implementation of technologies is critical, as is the participation by voluntary bodies and NGOs representing such groups."

The Green Paper on Living and Working in the Information Society, People First (European Commission, 1996b) continued the focus on inclusion in the information society. It suggested that empowerment and integration in the information society should focus in four areas: democracy (participation and representation in a range of decision-making fora, at many levels); equality of opportunity (specifically between women and men and the balance between family and working life); social integration (combatting exclusion and isolation in all its forms); and public healthcare. Although the Green Paper did not develop the theme of the role of voluntary organisations in these four areas, it did acknowledge that: *"It is important that we realize the great*

What Is eEurope?

eEurope is the core information society policy for the European Union. Its central aim is "an information society for all." eEurope is updated regularly to reflect specific targets and actions for achieving a range of policy objectives. Many EU Member States have also published national information society policies that refer to and reflect eEurope. The eEurope policy document considered by the study is "eEurope 2002: An Information Society for All Action Plan," 19-20 June (European Commission, 2000c). It and other eEurope documents can be accessed from the eEurope Web site: http://europe.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm (all in one line)

potential for public expression and experimentation in the IS, especially in areas which are low cost and accessible to grassroots groups," and that "the IS can increase participation and therefore involvement and co-responsibility of citizens in a wide range of issues, such as environmental protection".

Similarly, the follow-on document on the social and labour market dimension of the information society (European Commission, 1997c) continued the emphasis on social inclusion in the information society without highlighting the role of voluntary organisations.

The next major EU policy development on social aspects of the information society was the *eEurope* Initiative, first introduced in 1999. *eEurope* (European Commission, 2000c) clearly makes an inclusive information society a central policy concern.

At Community level, the High Level Group on the Employment and Social Dimension of the Information Society (ESDIS), based in the Employment and Social Affairs DG, is developing coordinating strategies for social aspects of eEurope in Member States. The recent ESDIS document on e-Inclusion (European Commission, 2001c) recognises the role of voluntary organisations, proposing that: *"Public authorities should encourage the development of on-line activities in the voluntary sector, including its catalytic role favouring access to public services, by providing financial incentives,*

technical assistance and support to the networking of NGOs, including innovative forms of stakeholder partnerships with private actors."

A number of areas in the *eEurope* Initiative are implicated in this study - areas in which the voluntary sector could have a possible role to play in fostering a more inclusive information society. The policy's latest version at the time of writing is: "eEurope 2002: An Information Society for All Action Plan," 19-20 June 2000.

Subsequent sections of this report will explore the potential role of voluntary organisations in many eEurope priority areas. Thematic areas were identified during initial analysis of *eEurope* and the literature review, and developed during analysis of the study interviews. The four central themes are discussed in separate chapters of this report:

- Training and employment in the information society
- Democratic participation and online content
- Social capital and participation for all
- Funding and partnerships

Training and Employment in the Information Society

Introduction

The European Commission's survey of the voluntary sector (1997) found that the number of voluntary organisations in Europe has grown enormously since the end of WWII, with a marked increase in the past two decades and "explosive" growth in the past ten years.

The reasons for this growth include: the shift in the economies of most European nations towards the provision of services; increasing delegation to voluntary organisations of services previously delivered by public authorities; changes in public preferences in services towards the more personal and client-centred approach favoured by voluntary organisations; identification of a whole new range of social needs; demographic changes resulting in more retired people who have time to volunteer; increases in prosperity and leisure time; and the creation of employment schemes involving voluntary organisations in response to the employment crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Voluntary organisations have been an important creator of employment over the same period. From 1980 to 1990, the voluntary sector accounted for one of every seven jobs created in France and one of every eight or nine in Germany. The EC report also estimates that somewhere between one-third and one-half of the population in Europe (around 100 million Europeans) is involved in some form of voluntary organisation. Other reports suggest that women are central to the voluntary sector.

Several aspects of this situation are of interest to the study. First, voluntary organisations are an important source of employment in Europe, providing training to their staff and numerous volunteers, many of whom go on to employment in other sectors. Thus the quality of computer and Internet training provided to voluntary sector staff and volunteers is an issue. Second, voluntary organisations across Europe are directly engaged in providing training in computers to socially disadvantaged groups and are thus important elements of strategies to prepare Europeans experiencing disadvantage for employment using computers and the Internet. Third, the prominence of women and older people in the voluntary sector is significant because these two groups have lower rates of Internet access.

The discussion below addresses three questions: What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in:

- Increasing employment using IT for staff and volunteers from disadvantaged groups?
- Training in basic computer skills?
- Training aimed at sustainable employment for disadvantaged groups in information society industries?

Increasing Employment Opportunities For Staff and Volunteers

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in increasing employment opportunities using IT for staff and volunteers?

Making The Transition From Voluntary Activities To Paid Work

A voluntary organisation in Spain provides ICT training in a disadvantaged urban community. Many of its volunteers live locally and have a low educational level, both in terms of formal studies and social skills. Some are immigrants. They begin their volunteer work as neighbours who come to the training centre and learn skills as they attend the sessions, later taking on tasks on a regular basis. Finding fixed employment is difficult because they have no official qualifications, but sometimes they go on to find jobs as security guards, cooks, shop assistants, and similar work. [From the interviews]

Acquiring ICT Skills Through Work With Voluntary Organisations

A voluntary organisation in Britain produces a comprehensive Web site of news and information on ethnic minority issues. Some of its IT officers have successfully moved on to other fields in the ICT sector. The organisation is pleased that staff use it as a stepping stone to ICT careers because "it's healthy, it ensures that there is always new blood in the organisation, new blood within the particular field of ICT which is very dynamic." [Quote from the interviews]

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents indicated that although many voluntary organisations provide computer and Internet training for their staff and volunteers, some do not, depending on the focus and resources of the organisation and the availability of training elsewhere. The level of training provided varies considerably among voluntary organisations. Some, especially those with few resources, are not able to deliver or provide effective computer training to their staff and volunteers and can be caught in a cycle of not being able to use computers effectively as organisations.

People experiencing disadvantage can acquire computer skills through their volunteer activities. This can happen when a volunteer from a disadvantaged group becomes more involved in the voluntary organisation and begins to learn computer skills in an informal and supportive setting. As volunteers become more skilled, they may enrol in more organised computer and Internet training. Skilled volunteers may become paid staff members and move on to employment in other organisations or sectors. Respondents indicated that this employment progression path may be more common for women than men and thus a little-understood but potentially important source of IT training to disadvantaged women. A key dynamic is that the volunteer is drawn to the voluntary organisation because of a particular interest area, and thus the computer skills are learned through involvement in personal interests.

However, respondents pointed out that some voluntary organisations do not have volunteers, or their volunteers are skilled professionals with adequate IT skills. In some voluntary organisations, volunteers and staff are not interested in using computers because their work involves intensive personal contact and they believe computers are an intrusion.

Training in Basic Computer Skills

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in training in basic computer skills?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: Few qualitative studies in Europe have evaluated the experiences of disadvantaged groups in computer skills training. One comprehensive study in Britain (Clarke, 1998) made a number of findings which would suggest that voluntary organisations can be important sites for training in basic computer skills. The study found that: training interventions should be local (few learners are willing to travel beyond a short distance to attend); the tutor's role - helping to reduce learners' doubts and replace them with confidence - requires a considerable degree of interpersonal and teaching skills in addition to an understanding

Teaching IT To Adult Learners

A voluntary organisation providing adult education in Finland runs an IT training centre in a large urban area. It offers training at many levels from basic to more advanced. Learners range from working professionals to the long-term unemployed and refugees, some of whom are illiterate. The training centre puts all the learners in the same classroom, because low self-esteem is a major restraint for people experiencing disadvantage and it wants to ensure that all students are equal. Those who cannot write their own language by hand are taught to write by computer because it is sometimes easier to learn the letters on the keyboard than by handwriting. Learners are also given email addresses, which many of the refugees use to keep in contact with people from their home country. Childcare is not provided at the training centre because the Finnish state provides childcare for all young children - free of charge if their parents cannot afford it. The voluntary organisation also operates an Internet cafe with childcare so women can take their babies with them while they learn. All the women refugees who attend their courses have a place for their children; if this were not provided, it is unlikely that any would be able to attend. [From the interviews]

of IT; many learners can overcome their lack of self-confidence in an initial training session; and that learners should have their questions answered promptly and develop a relationship with the tutor.

Other studies conducted in Britain of community-based ICT training initiatives (Day and Harris, 1997; Harris, 2000; Harris and Dudley, 2000) underline the importance of addressing disadvantage by providing training through local community and voluntary organisations. A comprehensive study by the INSINC Working Party in Britain found training in basic ICT skills for disadvantaged groups will not come about without strategies for community involvement, and basic capacity-building among community groups (INSINC, 1997). Similarly, studies in the US, such as the study by the Benton Foundation (1998) on initiatives to bring training in basic ICTs to low-income neighbourhoods, have underlined the strategic role of community-based groups, suggesting that strategies without their participation will not be effective.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents in the Nordic countries reported that state provision of computer training is widespread and voluntary organisations do not generally duplicate this training provision for people experiencing disadvantage; their role in this region includes referrals and liaison with state training providers, and providing specialised ICT training for professionals working with disadvantaged groups. However respondents in other regions of Europe indicated that voluntary organisations are

central providers of computer skills to disadvantaged groups. In some rural areas and in many areas of Eastern Europe, voluntary organisations are the sole providers of training in computers and the Internet to the local population. Voluntary organisations may also work with state training providers to offer different kinds of training to different target groups.

Respondents indicated that in many regions of Europe, libraries provide computers and public Internet access points to local communities but not the training and support that many disadvantaged groups need to use these tools effectively. Voluntary organisations can provide computer training to local community members, who can then go on to use computers in libraries. Voluntary organisations can also provide training and computer and Internet access to community members who do not use libraries. In particular, respondents reported that public Internet access facilities managed by voluntary and community organisations often provide childcare and training in evenings, and thus are more accessible to women with children.

The voluntary organisations providing computer skills training usually offer courses ranging from very basic skills (how to turn on a computer, how to use a mouse and keyboard) to more advanced (ECDL and HTML). Courses respond to local needs. In general, skills training has become more advanced as the skills and training needs of the local population and disadvantaged groups have become more sophisticated in recent years.

Computer skills training is often introduced to people experiencing disadvantage as part of other community provision. A person experiencing disadvantage may come into a local voluntary organisation seeking information or support, gradually become involved in various programmes, and be introduced to computer training as part of their more general involvement. This can be a slow process, involving many months of gradual introduction to computers.

Computer training can also be introduced as one component of a wider training programme for disadvantaged groups, such as literacy training. One respondent reported that simple computer-based language programmes can be effective for students who cannot write by hand - it can be easier to learn the letters on the keyboard than by handwriting.

A key component of computer skills training delivered by voluntary organisations is using trainers sympathetic to the needs and context of the target group. In some communities a culture of distrust and fear of formal learning situations has developed, and effective training in computer skills needs to begin with creating a positive atmosphere. Training may be introduced as non-threatening "taster" courses that link computers to other aspects of daily lives. People experiencing disadvantage may have low self-esteem and need to be motivated in creative ways.

Respondents indicated that voluntary organisations deliver computer and Internet training to other voluntary and community groups. Some have developed training manuals in computer and Internet use for voluntary organisations working with disadvantaged groups.

Challenges To Providing Specialised ICT Training

A voluntary organisation in Bulgaria working with people with physical disabilities set up a training project aimed at rehabilitation and social integration. The training included basic to advanced ICT skills, and most of the 50 learners were interested in future activities involving new ICTs. After overcoming restraints to setting up the computer club - including finding accessible training facilities, transportation, and appropriate hardware - the new club was up and running and becoming more popular every day. However after six months of operations, the club was robbed and had to close down. The voluntary organisation does not have the resources to restore it. [From the interviews]

Some networks of organisations delivering computer and Internet training and support have developed, especially in rural areas where commercial training provision is not available.

Many restraints and barriers to computer training were reported in the interviews. In Eastern Europe and in rural areas of Western Europe, these include lack of adequate infrastructure. The high cost of telecommunications has been a barrier but this has been rapidly reduced with competition in the industry. However training costs are still high in many regions, especially the cost of providing ongoing maintenance and support for computer hardware. Lack of adequate training facilities, especially in rural areas, is another restraint. The costs of providing childcare for trainees can be high and some funders are not willing to fund this and other social supports.

Training in basic computer skills for people with disabilities is a particular challenge for voluntary organisations. Those willing to take on this challenge may lack the resources. Barriers include few accessible training spaces (such as wheelchair accessible training rooms) and insufficient funding to develop and deliver the specialised training required. The costs of training delivery for people with disabilities are much higher than for other groups.

Training Aimed at Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Groups

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in providing training aimed at sustainable employment for disadvantaged groups?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: Significant skills shortages across Europe have been projected in core information society industries. The overall demand in Europe for IT experts is expected to reach 13 million by 2003, with the risk that up to 1.7 million jobs will be unfilled, particularly in high-growth areas such as software applications and services to optimise business processes through ICTs (European Commission, 2001b). Employers in these industries traditionally hire graduates with college or university qualifications, which are largely out of the reach of women and men experiencing disadvantage. This means that disadvantaged groups are effectively excluded from the most rapidly expanding areas of new employment in Europe.

Reports from Ireland on high-end ICT training for disadvantaged groups have highlighted the role of community and voluntary organisations (WRC, 1998 and 2000). A pilot project providing high-end ICT training in Microsoft Certifications to unemployed people in a disadvantaged community in Dublin found that the *"necessary conditions for such a tailored training initiative include ... staff familiar with and able to offer support for the particular difficulties facing long-term unemployed people, including financial and self-esteem issues"* (O'Donnell, 1998 and 1999).

Challenges To Training Disadvantaged Youth

A voluntary organisation in Spain is providing ICT training and support for residents in a disadvantaged urban community. The objective is to help young people with little formal education to gain computer and graphics skills which will allow them to find jobs. Rather than formal courses, the training is practical and day-by-day. Challenges include the difficulty of restricting those who use their facilities to a strict timetable, or of motivating them to complete a course over an extended time period. Many learners have low self-esteem and parents in informal employment, unemployed, or abusing alcohol. It has been difficult to convince government bodies to fund training programmes with informal, practical and non-theoretical training such as computer maintenance. However the voluntary organisation's ICT training project is gradually influencing the thinking of some government officials.

[From the interviews]

Several reports from EU-funded transnational Telematics Applications Programme (TAPS) projects found that increasing the sustainable employment prospects of women and men experiencing disadvantage involves finding ways to improve their self-confidence and self-esteem and overcome a variety of factors in their personal lives that restrain their progression (EMPLOY, 1999; EPITELIO, 1999). The EPITELIO project - providing telematics applications to support individuals, agencies and organisations concerned with promoting self-employment and teleworking in the fight against social inclusion across the EU - found that local community contacts were *"essential"* in ensuring the success of telematics projects aimed at increasing social inclusion. The project final report stated that local community workers are sensitive to local needs and that this knowledge was more important than knowledge of technical aspects without awareness of local needs.

In the US, evaluations have been conducted of the government-funded Community Technology Centres (CTCs) operating in the local community and voluntary sectors (Mark et al., 1997; Chow et al., 2000). The CTCs were being used to prepare resumes and research job opportunities and companies through the Internet.

Networking with others at the CTCs and reading job opportunities posted on bulletin boards also facilitated access to employment options. Some CTCs had increased their links with local employment agencies in order to provide better information for their users. Participants were also using the CTCs to improve their job skills, including literacy and computer skills. In some cases this led to increased employment opportunities. Some participants also considered new career and work options using ICTs through participation in the CTCs. The longitudinal studies of CTC participants found that some formerly unemployed participants were able to gain sufficient social capital and skills from their contacts and experiences in the CTCs to slowly develop sustainable career

Providing Training in High-end ICT Skills For Disadvantaged Women

A voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland is providing training for women experiencing disadvantage to "fast-track" them into sustainable employment in the IT sector. Training is delivered in industry-recognised certifications, primarily the Microsoft Certified Professional qualifications.

A major obstacle to training provision is eligibility requirements which prevent many women from participating. The UK government (which part-funds the programme) stipulates that participants must be unemployed for more than 17 months before taking part in full-time training, and that those in full-time training will have their social assistance benefits reduced. The training programme provides childcare and travel support and a range of personal supports.

Investing resources in personal supports for the participants - including activities and time for the women to get to know one another - has encouraged a very strong peer support group to develop.

Programme graduates continue to communicate by email and meet regularly to support each other in their new jobs in the IT sector.

[From the interviews]

paths. Again, this US research highlighted the importance of community-based training that could reach the disadvantaged people in the community.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Basic computer training delivered by voluntary organisations may lead directly to sustainable employment by persons experiencing disadvantage - however this is uncommon; one respondent said these cases are "a bit of a myth."

The respondents indicated that very few voluntary organisations in Europe are providing ICT training aimed at sustainable employment for disadvantaged groups, although voluntary organisations can refer people experiencing disadvantage to such training elsewhere. Although examples are rare, the study did interview two respondents working with voluntary organisations delivering high-end ICT training to disadvantaged groups.

Training aimed at sustainable employment for people experiencing disadvantage goes well beyond basic computer training. It requires substantial financing, resources and facilities as well as highly-skilled staff and trainers. A considerable restraint to offering more courses is financial resources and skills. Voluntary organisations may not be interested in or willing to make this kind of investment, especially when ICT-related employment is not available locally.

Voluntary organisations may not be motivated to

invest resources to develop and deliver high-end ICT training to local people experiencing disadvantage when the end result for training programme graduates is moving out of the local community to get a job.

Democratic Participation and Online Content

Introduction

The relationship between voluntary organisations and democratic participation is an area of considerable analysis among sociologists, communications theorists and political scientists. This chapter will review three inter-related sub-themes relevant to the study - political participation, civil society and the public sphere - in the context of the information society.

Voluntary organisations are prominent in theories of political democracy. The classical French political analyst Alexis de Tocqueville introduced the concept that through participation in voluntary associations, citizens receive an education in public affairs and create centres of political power independent of the state. The role of voluntary organisations in the political process has more recently become the subject of interest by researchers because of the weakening of traditional forms of political participation, such as voting. In France, for example, Eric Dacheux (2000) states that parallel to the process of disengagement with the traditional political parties has been a remarkable rise in participation through voluntary association, which has also occurred more broadly across Europe. As new information and communication technologies have become more widely available, voluntary organisations have used them for engaging with the political process.

Civil society is the second sub-theme. The concept of civil society is useful as a way of describing a third sector of society between the state and the commercial sector where many opportunities exist for active social participation. Voluntary organisations are central civil society actors. To give just one example, research on voluntary organisations in the health sector in France suggests that their role is "located between dreaming of a better world and rising up against a market-based system where health and quality of life take second place to commercial interests" (Craplet, 1997). Researchers such as Eric Dacheux (2000) in France, Brian Trench and Susan O'Donnell (1997) in Ireland, and Lewis Friedland (1996) and Hans Klein (1999) in the US, among others, have suggested that ICT use by voluntary organisations can strengthen civil society by extending their work on behalf of disadvantaged groups. On the level of networks, researchers such as Manuel Castells (1997) have analysed how social movements use the Internet to network. From Italy, Alberto Melucci (1996) has analysed how social movements are transforming society by using new information and communication practices to spread their messages more effectively.

The third sub-theme is the public sphere. In a liberal democracy, government stability is dependant on public opinion. As conceived by Jürgen Habermas almost four decades ago in Germany (1989[1962]), the public sphere is the arena where public opinion is formed. It is independent of government and dedicated to rational debate amongst citizens. More recently, theorists have suggested that multiple public spheres, revolving around voluntary organisations and social movements, foster participation in the public arena by participants whose voices would not otherwise be heard (Fraser, 1992; Keane, 1995; Dacheux, 2000; O'Donnell, 2001). The public sphere concept is particularly relevant for the European

Union in the context of the democratic deficit. Some analysts, including Philip Schlesinger (1999), have questioned whether the new public spaces emerging in the European Union as a result of political and economic integration will lead to increased transnational European communication and media activities. From this perspective, voluntary organisations could use the Internet to increase the influence and resonance of people experiencing disadvantage in the public sphere by creating online content reflecting their perspectives.

The discussion below addresses three questions: What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in:

- Supporting the online political process?
- Using the Internet to strengthen civil society?
- Expanding online content and the public sphere?

Supporting the Online Political Process

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in supporting the online political process?

Outsourcing Government Information Production to Voluntary Organisations

Researcher Sabine Lang (2000) found that political devolution in Germany has encouraged local governments to semi-privatise or outsource public information projects to voluntary organisations: "One of the most interesting developments has been the 'semi-privatization of communication' at the local level. This development means that the organization and management of civic communication processes between government and citizens - or deliberative fora among citizens - is being handed over to NGOs."

Supporting the online political process refers to voluntary organisations using the Internet to interact with local and national government and public authorities, including participating with the creation and use of government content online.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: In France, the history of citizens and their associations using public television for engaging with the political process has been described by Eric Maigret and Laurence Monnoyer (1998, 2000). In their analysis of this process in the municipal authority of Issy-les-Moulineux, the researchers found that voluntary organisations were excluded from the process and suggested that future participation by community members would be increased if voluntary organisations played a more central role. Isabelle Pailliar (2000) has emphasised the importance of citizens associations in the local online

political process, especially as providers of information on local issues that informs and stimulates discussion, both online and offline.

In Germany, Lang (2000) found that voluntary organisations use the Internet to influence agenda setting and media framing of political issues. At the same time that NGOs have contributed to the "*democratization of the local public sphere*," the situation is also contributing to new political and social divisions. The larger, more established and resourceful NGOs are the most active users of ICTs and increasingly, they are more likely to be consulted by local governments, leaving the smaller NGOs behind. These larger NGOs are sometimes given powers previously reserved for local authorities: "*We have encountered communities ... in which local NGOs have been asked to organize discursive settings for citizen participation and in which the actual decision-making bodies did not see the need to be present anymore. NGOs were thus being paid to filter and channel public opinion in lieu of the actual governing bodies.*"

In Italy, working with local voluntary organisations and private sponsors, the Municipality of Bologna has developed a telematic and literacy training initiative to encourage social inclusion in the local participatory process (Guidi, 2000). However, no analysis of user profiles has been published, making it difficult to assess if this objective has been realised. Analysis of another public information access initiative in Italy looked at how a process of mutual learning was applied in the Municipality of Venice regarding the industrial site of Porto Marghera (De Marchi et al., 2001). The ICT component of the process was a website for sharing public information. The researchers concluded that effective information sharing on public issues required trust among the different actors: public institutions, industry, non-governmental organisations and private citizens.

The Dutch government's strategy for publishing government information has evolved to include outsourcing different aspects to private companies and voluntary agencies (Bouwman and Nouwens, 1999). In this model, voluntary organisations are prevalent as publishers of government information. The research concluded that the partnerships between government and private and non-profit organisation were crucial to the system's success. "*The active participation of government, profit organisations and not-for-profit organisations in electronic publishing of government information has resulted in complicated networks of participating actors. This often leads to conflicting roles... (but also) provides a fruitful base for one-stop shopping centres in which difference information sources are combined (that) greatly contribute to the accessibility of government information.*"

In Amsterdam, the Digital City is a Web site representing Amsterdam as a virtual city and virtual community (Brants et al., 1996). The digital town hall provides access to

Government Web Sites Become An IT Training Resource

A voluntary organisation in Finland providing ICT training to unemployed people and refugees uses extensively the Web sites of the government and local municipalities as a training resource. The trainers show the learners many different Web sites with information on social rights and entitlements, taxation, employment, and local transportation timetables. The students learn their rights and entitlements as they learn the IT applications. Trainers assign practical tasks such as finding specific government information that will be useful for their individual situations. [From the interviews]

administrative information previously reserved for municipal employees and politicians. Access is gained through Internet connections, including through public terminals in libraries, museums, the town hall and homes for the elderly. However, user profile analysis found that users were mostly young, well-educated, employed and male. Brants et al. (1996) analysed Amsterdam's early experiments with interactive discussion programmes on public access television. The intent was to create an environment with citizens telling politicians their thoughts rather than politicians trying to convince citizens; the format involved representatives from political parties and NGOs discussing issues such as poverty, unemployment, crime and housing. From their homes, audiences could access background information via teletext and react through a poll and contributions to the televised debate. As the series progressed, the technology advanced to include public access points in

Citizens Groups Stimulating Online Debate

Research on online political debates between citizens and politicians in three municipalities in Sweden found that few politicians contributed to the process (Ranerup, 2000). The research concluded that future strategies for online political discussions should include more involvement of community networks of various citizen groups and local organisations. "As a first step, the citizen groups might find it useful to share information among themselves, as well as discuss various issues online... In this way, the common group interests of parents or relatives to participate in a virtual community that exists will be used as a ground for activity. This is opposed to a situation where a common place of residence is taken as sufficient guarantee that the on-line debate will be lively."

libraries and the town hall. However, the broadcasting nature of television ensured that the process remained essentially one-way rather than interactive. Analysis of the phone-in contributors found that few "ordinary people" were involved; *"there was a bias towards the well-spoken, the educated and the politically interested."* The disadvantaged were marginalised in the "electronic democracy" process.

Another analysis from the Netherlands analysed interactive decision-making on two public issues: expanding Rotterdam Harbour, and forming a city province for the Rotterdam region, both involving voluntary organisations in the process (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000). The study concluded that the processes were not successful because the politicians spoiled the game: *"There appears to be a problematic relation between politicians and interactive decision making. On the one hand politicians often are the initiators of these processes but on the other hand they seem to participate little and view the process as a threat to their power."* The researchers conclude by developing a model for a more participatory interaction by politicians.

An analysis of local government websites in Belgium (Steyaert, 2000) found that most official municipal sites were good or very good at providing government information but that few had attention for the wider community. *"More than 64% of the official web sites do not offer any form of community information at all. There is no participation of any organization or level of the local community or society. Only a few sites give attention to information about or from local organizations.... Striking is the fact that the level of interaction is low or even zero for many official web sites... it certainly looks as if local governments do not want their citizens to contact them"*

electronically... (and they) do not support in any manner the development of a local electronic democracy." Another study of interactive digital public services in Belgium (Cammaerts, 2001) noted that these services are "still in an embryonic stage." Government Web sites are more informative than interactive and very few policy documents are online.

In their wider analysis of civic websites in Europe, Aurigi and Graham (1998) found that few included provision for interactive dialogue on citizens issues. They suggest that "the private, commodified, urban marketing ethos leads to widespread sanitation: crime reports are never among the topics covered, and information and debate about other typical urban problems such as pollution, racial and social tensions, and levels of poverty are usually ignored."

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents indicated that voluntary organisations that are delivering basic computer training commonly encourage trainees to look for relevant information on Web sites of government and public authorities. Voluntary organisations with their own Web sites may include links to relevant Web sites of government and public authorities, especially local authorities where possible.

However in many areas, government or public information is not available online, or is not presented in a format accessible to people experiencing disadvantage; often the language used is confusing. Government information online is rarely presented in specialised formats which are accessible to those with certain disabilities.

The information on government Web sites is sometimes out of date. In some regions, especially in Eastern Europe, governments and public authorities have made very little information available online and may be reluctant to do so because of a culture of keeping information to themselves rather than sharing it with the public.

Voluntary organisations mediate government information online aimed at people experiencing disadvantage. The organisations staff or volunteers can read the information online and pass it on in more accessible language to individuals experiencing disadvantage, or else accompany individuals seeking government information while they are online, interpreting and translating information for them as it comes up on the screen. Voluntary organisations commonly print out information from government Web pages and post it in areas accessible to people experiencing disadvantage, such as bulletin boards on the walls of community centres - this is one way that government information online is transmitted to people who do not use computers or the Internet.

"We Think the Internet is a Powerful Political Tool"

"In some of our education programmes we train people with disabilities to use Internet systems to talk to government. Many of the voluntary organisations we work with are working to change politics and make impressions on the political parties. So we are teaching them about how they can use the Internet and discussion boards and other techniques to support the organisation in their work. We think that the Internet is a powerful tool to create pressure on the political parties and on the political system." [Quote from the interviews]

Voluntary organisations may develop their own information about government services and make this available on their Web sites, believing that the information will be explained better in the context of their own cultural situation. Voluntary organisations may lobby government agencies to make public information more accessible rather than taking on the task of developing parallel information and delivery mechanisms for government information.

One respondent is developing a gateway through which disadvantaged people can communicate with public authorities. Opportunities are increasing for members of disadvantaged groups to use the Internet to engage directly with the political process, such as emailing authorities and participating directly in online consultations. However, voluntary organisations continue to play a role of mediator between government and disadvantaged groups. People experiencing disadvantage may see voluntary organisations as their representatives in the political process.

**Social, Not Technical,
Restraints to Online
Consultation**

"For a lot of people, sending an email to a government official is a challenging and exposing experience, a bit like standing up in a public meeting. People wonder - What happens to the words I'm keying in here? Where do they go? Who will read them? What can they know about me? Sending an email about your views on your neighbourhood to the city council would be quite off-putting to a lot of people because many of them will have been beaten into a kind of submission over the years by authorities. We can easily overcome the technical barriers that provide systems and monitoring but until you have got a culture of constructive participation and responsibility among local people and the access to decision-making processes using both the Internet and traditional forms of media, it is a complete mistake to try and say that this is about online consultation."
[Quote from the interviews]

Some activist voluntary organisations encourage participation in lobbying and consultation processes online, alongside face-to-face efforts and lobbying through more traditional channels. Several respondents are developing and supporting online consultation processes with local governments. Voluntary organisations may encourage users of their community-based Internet points to access public officials through email to ask questions and voice concerns. However, this process is frustrating or demoralising when the emails are not answered.

Many individuals experiencing disadvantage have developed a distrust of government and public authorities, and making Internet tools available for direct communication with these authorities does not overcome this distrust. Rather, the Internet is better seen as just one tool available in a larger process of developing a culture of constructive participation between government and public authorities and people experiencing disadvantage. Concern was expressed by respondents that the transition to eGovernment and public information online may further marginalise disadvantaged groups who do not use computers and the Internet - they may be pushed into using online tools to communicate with authorities when they want and need face-to-face contact with people.

Strengthening Civil Society

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations to strengthen civil society in the information society?

Strengthening civil society refers to voluntary organisations using computers and the Internet to build their capacity as civil society organisations and networks of organisations working on behalf of disadvantaged groups.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: Comprehensive research in Ireland (O'Donnell, Trench and Ennals, 1998) found many restraints and barriers related to low levels of funding that limited the use of computers and the Internet by voluntary organisations. The Irish research found that the most significant barrier to getting a computer, and getting a computer hooked up to the Internet, was the combination of cost and low income - either an organisation wanted to use the Internet but could not afford to, or the Internet was not enough of a priority among more urgent needs. Low-income voluntary organisations may have been in a position to purchase a computer and modem (or acquire them by donation) but could not afford computer training, technical advice and support, ongoing maintenance, Internet fees and increased telephone costs.

The Irish research found that many voluntary organisations had very low and old computer resources; in some only one computer was available for many staff members or active volunteers. The Internet was more difficult to use than commonly acknowledged for voluntary organisations. Technical problems related to hardware and software restrained more frequent use. In particular, trying to keep up with software updates - for example when an Internet service provider updates its software or changes brands of software - could pose a real problem. Computer crashes were common, especially when searching the Web for information. Technical problems were particularly challenging for voluntary organisations without access to reliable and affordable technical advice and support. The helplines of computer manufacturers and Internet service providers were criticised for being too busy and understaffed and not sensitive to the sector's needs.

Do Computers Mix With Social Work?

A voluntary organisation in Finland providing a comprehensive Internet information and communication service also employs many social workers who are not keen to use the Internet for social work - they believe that face-to-face is the best way to communicate with people seeking support. More recently, however, some have begun to see its usefulness. The Internet service draws in people in remote areas and those who prefer to seek information and discuss issues anonymously. [From the interviews]

Improving Internet Capacity In The Voluntary Sector

A voluntary organisation in Bulgaria provides ICT training for other voluntary organisations. In 1998, the training was on a very basic level but very quickly the trainers saw that organisations were interested in the Internet. They developed training in using the Internet for promotion and communication, which led to several successful Internet-based campaigns on environmental issues. Until 1999, a considerable restraint to this work was the weak telecommunications infrastructure outside major urban areas and the high cost of Internet access. Since late 2000, the infrastructure has improved and the cost of Internet access has dropped considerably, stimulating many more Bulgarian voluntary organisations to hook up to the Internet. [From the interviews]

Research in Northern Ireland (Talbot and Newman, 1998) found that technical problems with the Internet service and lack of computer training were common among voluntary organisations. Research in the UK (Burt and Taylor, 1999) found that computers contribute most to enhancing administrative and operational functions of voluntary organisations. In general, the organisations were aware of wider potential of ICTs but lacked the resources - such as qualified staff, technological infrastructure, or organisational commitment - to exploit them.

Using The Internet To Share Information Globally

A voluntary organisation in Spain working with deaf people believes there is a great need to share information among voluntary organisations on a global level. Social exclusion affects the whole planet, and there should be cooperation amongst organisations in different countries - sharing experiences, coordinating, avoiding duplication, explaining their own experiences. Their experience with transnational partners on EU-funded projects has demonstrated the advantages of sharing information and knowledge with similar organisations across Europe. [From the interviews]

On the level of networks, APC (Association of Progressive Communications) is the largest non-profit global computer network, linking more than 30,000 activists and activist groups worldwide. APC comprises more than a dozen interconnecting networks with nodes in many countries. The largest APC network, IGC (Institute for Global Communications) in the US, has more than 15,000 members. In Europe, APC has networks in the UK (GreenNet), Germany (ComLink), Spain (Pangea), the Czech Republic (Econnect), Bulgaria (BlueLink), Hungary (GreenSpider), the Ukraine (GLUK) and Romania (StrawberryNet). Many of these networks and their member organisations are using the Internet to network on international issues - providing global support networks for disadvantaged groups around the world - as well as on regional, national and local issues.

GreenNet, the APC network in the UK, has published a "Civil Society Internet Charter" for "building civil society use of the Internet and defending and extending the rights of those who use the Internet for social campaigning purposes" (GreenNet, 2001).

Paul Stubbs (1998) conducted a case study of how the APC networks were used during the wars of Yugoslav succession. The network grew to link anti-war groups in Zagreb and Belgrade whose communications were cut or slowed during the conflict. Network servers were set up in the two cities, with another in Germany; more servers were later added in five other cities in the region. The network - used during the war years by a wide range of anti-war groups, other social movement organisations, and individuals - was funded by the West and offered free access at point of use in most cities served. The researcher believes that the network was: *"a kind of experimental participatory democracy, in which Western peace activists ... formed relationships with local activists ... which were very different from the exploitative ones often found in such encounters."*

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents indicated that voluntary organisations across Europe are using ICTs to build their capacity, and this includes those working with disadvantaged groups. Barriers and restraints to capacity-building with ICTs reported in the interviews are similar to the Irish research cited above, primarily low levels of funding,

lack of time for training, limited ICT expertise within organisations, and technical difficulties related to poor infrastructure and outdated equipment. A wide range of ICT expertise and capacity exists among voluntary organisations across Europe.

Voluntary organisations use computers for creating documents, building databases, making publicity materials, performing administrative tasks and other organisational work. Within networked organisations, staff members use internal email and discussion lists to work more efficiently. Email is used whenever possible for external communications, increasing communication speed and cost effectiveness. Voluntary organisations can make the Web and email their central tools of communication, building a virtual presence nationally or internationally in a way that would have been impossible before the Internet. Web pages are used to make information available about social disadvantage to the wider public and for educational and promotional campaigns generally.

Voluntary organisations use the Internet to keep up to date with the work of organisations outside their geographical area of interest. Voluntary organisations working with people with disabilities may find the Internet to be an effective way to get around some transportation difficulties. One reported innovative use of the Internet is information services and online counselling for drug users who are inhibited from seeking counselling in public centres.

The low levels of Internet use by disadvantaged groups severely limits the extent to which voluntary organisations can use it for their work with these groups. Several respondents believe that the best communication is face to face contact, which can then be supplemented with email contact between meetings. Sometimes the key people with the community development skills within voluntary organisations do not have Internet skills and they can be marginalised by online communications.

The Internet is used both to strengthen organisational capacity and to build networks of organisations. The Internet has made possible new forms of coalitions and working groups, allowing members to meet in

Restraints To Sharing Information On The Internet

Voluntary organisations may not want to share information with other voluntary organisations - on the Internet or by traditional means, given that opportunities for funding are scarce. A voluntary organisation in Bulgaria suggests that a way to address this situation is to develop more Internet-based information networks including mailing lists and online discussions on different topics. This will help create a more open culture where information is shared and activities in the voluntary sector are more widely discussed. [From the interviews]

The Internet Allows a New Form of Voluntary Organisation

"It's decentralised, not hierarchical, and coordinated via email groups. There are general assemblies every two or three months which are face-to-face, and in-between there are commissions which work on specific projects or around press or logistics and they again coordinate via email. One group began around a plebiscite which was held last year to coincide with the general elections. People voted on whether Spain should condone the foreign debt that some of the poorest countries have with the Spanish government. There were more than one million votes and over 1,000 organisations involved and it was all coordinated by Internet." [Quote from the interviews]

person less frequently but maintain intensive communications by email in their work with people experiencing disadvantage. In areas where mature online networks exist among coalitions of groups, the Internet is used as a tool for lobbying, campaigning and developing common responses to policy initiatives.

However several respondents reported that a significant barrier to linking civil society with the Internet is that some voluntary organisations do not want to share information, particularly about funders and projects.

Expanding Online Content and the Public Sphere

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in expanding online content and the public sphere?

Expanding online content and the public sphere refers to voluntary organisations using computers and the Internet to produce community media and other content online. This content responds to the specific needs of disadvantaged groups, or introduces their views and voices into a wider public sphere.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: Agnès Hubert and Bénédicte Caremier (2000), Deirdre Curtain (1999) and Eric Dacheux (2000) have suggested that the Internet will offer new communication opportunities for voluntary organisations and other civil society actors in Europe, particularly for widening a European public sphere.

Few studies have been conducted on the specific topic of how voluntary organisations are using the Internet to create online content and expand the public sphere for disadvantaged groups. Some research exists touching on the role of voluntary organisations in creating online content in the health and disability areas.

Looking first at public information specifically on health and disability, a report of research in Germany (Neumann and Uhlenkueken, 2001) describes that no other European country provides as much information for disabled people. Muenster was the first German city to publish an interactive street map for disabled people on its Web site, part of a project called KOMM. The research on KOMM found that voluntary organisations and societies representing the interests of disabled people were active collaborators in the project's design and in online activities to involve disabled people in awareness activities. The KOMM project's future includes an interactive Internet-based database for users themselves to identify urban sites that need to be made more accessible for disabled people. The researchers state that this dynamic approach, using the participation of user groups and societies "*will guarantee the topicality of the data and thus contribute to its attractiveness and acceptance.*"

A study of access to healthcare information services in Ireland (MacDougall, 1995) found a lack of adequate information on healthcare at the right level for the public, patients and

their carers, and that publishing information leaflets by voluntary bodies and charities was helping to improve the situation. The report recommended that *"the fostering and improvement of communications and information exchange with voluntary organisations including self-help groups, charities and other information providers"* should be considered. Similarly, an early report from the PREVNET EURO project based in Finland has suggested that successful use of ICTs for preventing substance abuse will require a seamless chain of information and services of all social partners (Peltoniemi, 1999). Reports from other countries involved in the PREVNET EURO project also suggest a central role for voluntary organisations (Tammi and Peltoniemi, 1999).

Recent studies in Canada (Reddick, 2000) and the US (Children's Partnership, 2000) have suggested that the provision of more local content will stimulate people experiencing disadvantage to use the Internet. In this context, online content created by local community and voluntary organisations that meets social, economic and cultural needs is a factor encouraging Internet use by disadvantaged groups. In particular, the US study suggested that a resource of good local content should be gathered, and that: *"To make this resource available most efficiently, we recommend that groups that represent underserved constituencies work together to assemble and maintain this resource"* (Children's Partnership, 2000).

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents reported significant challenges facing voluntary organisations in their attempts to use the Internet to bring the voices of people experiencing disadvantage into a wider public sphere. Most disadvantaged communities across Europe have low levels of Internet use. In a local setting, people prefer to discuss issues face-to-face, and often there are literacy barriers to using computer-based communications. Although Internet-based chat rooms and discussion groups for disadvantaged groups have been developed and supported by voluntary organisations in many areas of Europe, respondents said that the results have been mostly disappointing, with a few exceptions.

Voluntary organisations across Europe publish information online about the disadvantaged communities they represent or work with. The interviews suggested that voluntary organisations in the Nordic region are

Online Content Close to Users' Needs

A voluntary organisation in Spain supports an intranet for deaf people with content designed by deaf people and directed towards other deaf Internet users. The focus is exchanging useful information among deaf people and the organisations working with deaf people. They also produce information directed externally, such as information about the organisation and newsletters projecting an organisational image. The externally-directed content is generally not very professionally or attractively presented - as a disadvantaged group, the deaf people putting the content together are not aware of the way in which the mass media works and the expectations of content consumers. Similarly, the internal material on the intranet is not very well focused or organised because of the lack of experience in the general techniques of information organisation, again coming from their lack of integration into the larger society. However, this internal information is much more alive and rich for them, because the producers and users do not follow pre-established rules and their own spontaneity makes it closer to their own needs. [From the interviews]

"The Internet Has Exploded Everything"

"The Internet has exploded everything in terms of giving us access to a wider international community. We receive a lot of emails from outside the UK. People from around the world are interested in the information that we provide. For example we had a group from Denmark who visited our site and liked what they read so it helped us create these links with other organisations and individuals who are interested in the work we do. It has helped us develop stronger international links which is particularly important now that Britain is moving into Europe. The amount of racism and xenophobia in Europe is incredible so we have to be in a position to take that on board once we fully integrate." [Quote from the interviews]

Encouraging A Group Response to National Issues

"We work in remote communities - you are talking about maybe two or three people in a community who want to use the Internet to get a point over on the national agenda. Hopefully that will develop and maybe that two or three in each community will start talking to each other and make a response. There is a bigger challenge there about getting them to work as a team because it does tend to be quite insular. If you're talking about a national issue, often people are opinionated on an individual basis but we would be trying to get them to make a group response. It's very much about us as an organisation making sure that we are aware of every opportunity and encouraging people to use ICTs." [Quote from the interviews]

among the most active publishers of information online for disadvantaged groups. Respondents from the Nordic countries have been publishing information on the Web for years and have also developed innovative uses for ICTs to make the voices of people experiencing disadvantage more widely heard.

Respondents indicated that among the most active publishers of online content are environmental organisations, and organisations representing particular disadvantaged groups, such as the black community, whose concerns are not adequately addressed in the mass media.

Respondents indicated that environmental organisations are active Internet users, particularly to share information on global campaigns and make their concerns known to the media and the public outside their own countries. This work has a particular importance in Eastern Europe, where environmental degradation can pose significant health risks to the general population. These organisations see their role as seeking out information on pollution and health risks, often from reluctant public authorities, making it available on the Internet, and engaging in campaigns both on the Internet and locally, working with authorities and local communities to find solutions to common environmental problems.

Respondents said that a major barrier to producing content online is insufficient funds and the lack of skills necessary to produce and maintain an information site on the Web. One voluntary organisation in Sweden working on disability issues has two journalists writing content for its Web site, but this situation is rare in the voluntary sector across Europe. Respondents working with immigrant groups report that language is a barrier and low resources inhibit production of content in languages other than English.

Some respondents reported they would like to publish health information online, particularly health information geared for specific disadvantaged groups but were restricted by the high costs of producing quality health information. Voluntary organisations can work with local or national health authorities to produce online content on health targeted at specific disadvantaged groups.

In general, the respondents see the Internet as part of a wider strategy of communication and information exchange, with their constituents and the general public. This includes printed newsletters, postal mailouts, information services by telephone, and more formal media production.

Voluntary organisations producing community media and alternative media - such as newspapers, radio, community television, community video and so on - may lack the capacity and the resources to use this expertise to develop new forms of media production using the Internet, multimedia and other ICTs.

Active campaigning organisations may orient much of their information production to the mass media; some have developed sophisticated strategies to create sympathetic relationships with journalists, and this can be extended to Internet journalists and Web editors. A respondent reported that one activist organisation spent several years developing a relationship with an editor at a top Web search engine; this relationship was successful and search requests for information on this topic are directed to the Web site of the campaigning organisation.

However, several respondents said that the mass media are not generally oriented to covering social inclusion and social disadvantage, and engaging journalists to write about the issues is a significant challenge, whether or not the Internet is used.

An emerging issue from the interviews is Internet rights - affordable access and the right to communicate - as it specifically relates to voluntary organisations and their attempts to make information available for journalists and activists about social disadvantage, human rights and other core social issues. One respondent in the interviews reported receiving threats from legal firms about content on its Web site, which hosts Web pages for voluntary organisations in the UK. Given the low financial resources of the voluntary organisation, and that the legal responsibility for content is still unclear, they decided to ask the Web page's

"It's About How You Use ICT With Other Means of Communication"

"The Internet is only going to increase marginalisation of communities who have barriers of money, access, training, language, education whatever. We've always been aware of that so we've always tried to make sure we had a low-end solution. We're not really that high-tech when it comes down to it - technology is only the means, it's the tool. It's what you do with it - the content, the substance - that's what important. It's about how you use ICT with other means of communication to work with people who probably don't have access to the Internet, working with radio networks, magazines, newspapers, publications. Combining those technologies has helped us to work with excluded communities."
[Quote from the interviews]

owner to remove the content. This situation highlights the challenges facing voluntary organisations in Europe for using the Internet to highlight human rights issues globally. The "Internet Rights" campaign for civil society is developing grassroots support and is an emerging policy area at European and international level.

Social Capital and Participation for All

Introduction

The concept of social capital has become more central to analyses of social inclusion and the social well-being of nations, as discussed in a recent OECD publication (2001b). Theories of social capital in Europe were popularised by Pierre Bourdieu (1993[1984]), who suggested that social capital could be defined as the benefits accruing to individuals through belonging to a group. In his view, social capital is linked to economic capital, and understanding the relationship between them requires analysis of the functions of clubs, families, businesses and other social institutions.

A well-known study of the link between social capital and voluntary organisations is Robert Putnam's research (1993) into democracy and civic traditions in Italy. Putnam found that active participation in voluntary organisations encouraged strong social capital and a more democratic civic culture in certain regions of Italy. His argument is that membership in voluntary associations encourages democratic socialisation and learning processes through the development of trust and cooperative attitudes. More recently, Putnam (2000) has argued that declining membership in voluntary organisations in the US has led to reduced civic attitudes in that country.

Putnam's research in Italy has stimulated comparative studies and analyses elsewhere in Europe. A study of the relationship between voluntary organisations and social capital in Germany and Sweden (Stolle, 1998) found some support for the theory that membership in voluntary organisations builds trust and social capital. Another study in Sweden (Lindström et al., 2001) found a link between high levels of social capital through civic engagement and positive health behaviour, suggesting that a strong sense of being able to influence one's own health increases healthy activities.

This and similar research suggests several areas of investigation for the study. These include the extent to which voluntary organisations can build trust in and awareness of the Internet by people experiencing disadvantage, through facilitating computer and Internet use by these groups. A related issue is the specific link between voluntary organisations, social capital and the Internet. Craig Calhoun (1998) questions the extent to which the Internet can bind people to each other in dense social networks and to supplement voluntary organising work that also goes on face-to-face.

The discussion below addresses three questions: What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in:

- Increasing awareness of ICTs?
- Building trust in ICTs?
- Using the Internet to provide support and networks for people experiencing disadvantage?

Increasing Awareness of ICTs

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in increasing awareness of ICTs?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: The EU-funded PROMISE Project produced 20 case studies across Europe outlining best practice in ICT use for inclusion in the information society for disabled people and older people (STAKES, 1998). Voluntary organisations were involved in many best practice projects, including organisations representing and advocating for disabled people and older people in Finland, Ireland, Sweden and the UK. The voluntary organisations served a

Raising Internet Awareness In A Traditional Village

A voluntary organisation in Spain is working to raise awareness and use of ICTs in a conservative, rural, isolated village with a large elderly population. One of their awareness-raising projects was quite imaginative. There is a religious tradition in Catalonia of creating a portable chapel with the image of a saint inside, which is passed from house to house, whereby the inhabitants enjoy the benefits of the saint's blessing while they look after it. To raise awareness of ICTs, the voluntary organisation decided to use the same model - but with a computer inside rather than a saint. The computer inside the small chapel goes from bar to bar, from club to club, etc., and in each place is connected to the Internet. In this way, the Internet becomes part of the daily life of the village.

[From the interviews]

variety of functions, primarily promoting awareness about assistive technologies and ICT opportunities among people with disabilities and older people.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents indicated that in regions of Europe where state provision of social and community services is weak or ineffective, voluntary organisations are central providers of services and thus their use of ICTs for service delivery has an important impact on ICT awareness among people experiencing disadvantage.

There may of course be a big gap between ICT awareness and use. A respondent noted that many people experiencing disadvantage are far more concerned with daily survival than using the Internet, however aware of the technology they may be.

Respondents suggested that voluntary organisations working with people with disabilities, and also women's organisations, are highly instrumental in promoting awareness of ICTs among their constituents. Immigrants and refugees, particularly

those without dominant language skills, are also often introduced to ICTs by voluntary organisations.

Voluntary organisations encourage awareness of the Internet among people experiencing disadvantage in ways ranging from highlighting their email or Web address in promotional material through offering specific computer training courses for disadvantaged groups. As mentioned in a previous chapter, voluntary organisations may offer computer training and awareness as a component of other training or service provision for people experiencing disadvantage.

Voluntary organisations work with public authorities on community-wide ICT awareness campaigns to introduce technologies in a strategic and coordinated manner to sectors of the population with traditionally low use rates, such as older people in rural or traditional communities. In this process, voluntary organisations can reach out to the most disadvantaged community members and use dynamic methods to spark curiosity and interest in ICTs.

"Trust Only Comes When People Feel Comfortable With The Technology"

"There are many concerns around the Internet, about privacy, security and so on. Certainly people see the potential but they also get frustrated with it, particularly when it won't work for whatever reason. One of the problems is that we give people the very basic skills in how to use the Internet and email but they don't have the troubleshooting skills if something goes wrong. Often they haven't purchased a maintenance or after sales support package and they are afraid to ring some of the technical support lines in case they feel stupid or because it costs so much a minute. There is a real need to have people working in the community and voluntary sector who provide free or very cheap troubleshooting and maintenance."
[Quote from the interviews]

Building Trust in ICTs

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in building trust in ICTs?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: The theme of building trust in ICTs was foreshadowed by early research in Britain which found that local community groups are aware of the particular needs of the target group and can build the trust necessary to encourage them to overcome feelings of inadequacy around computers. Catherine Cassell (1990) and Cassell and Fitter (1988) investigated early community-based IT initiatives for long-term unemployed people in the city of Sheffield, Britain. Their research found that: "*The location of resources needs to be in the appropriate psychological environment, that is a friendly welcoming place that will not be intimidating to people who have suffered from the lack of confidence associated with long-term unemployment. Above all it needs to be local. Training needs to be informal and addressed to the specific needs of the target groups. The tutors need to be particularly sensitive to the needs of the unwaged that may be very different from other groups of users*" (Cassell, 1990).

In Ireland and Northern Ireland, women's organisations are using the Internet discussion group Womenslink to share information on common issues of concern (O'Donnell, 2001). Womenslink is managed by a voluntary organisation in Belfast. Analysis of Womenslink found that the network is supporting the development of IT skills for women, through sharing information about computer trouble-shooting and support, IT training opportunities, and various other IT-related activities.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: The respondents suggested that voluntary organisations build trust in computer technologies among people experiencing disadvantage, with time, if the applications are credible, accessible and affordable and meet their needs.

Voluntary organisations rooted in communities build trust in computers by virtue of their lasting presence and long-term work in the community. Some people who are suspicious of technology are also suspicious of change, and it can take considerable time to build trust in new ICTs.

Some respondents believe that voluntary organisations should set an example for their communities by sharing information about ICTs and using appropriate technology solutions, especially low cost applications. They believe that voluntary organisations should be role models and leaders and demonstrate long-term commitment to using new ICTs.

In some regions of Europe, the potential for building trust in the Internet among people experiencing disadvantage is severely limited by lack of access. This is especially the case for public Internet access for people with disabilities. In Sophia, Bulgaria for example, no public Internet points are accessible to people in wheelchairs.

Several respondents believe that people experiencing exclusion should participate not only as end users of ICTs but also as planners and creators of ICTs; trust is developed as people become involved in developing technology for their own needs.

Providing Support and Networks for the Disadvantaged

What is the potential role of voluntary organisations in providing support and networks for the disadvantaged?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: A team from Warwick University (Liff et al., 2000) recently evaluated community-based computer learner centres ("E-Gateways") in Britain and identified several features that "*led to the successful inclusion of social groups under-represented in general Internet use and show that access needs not only technology but depends on the right sort of social place and support.*" They found that "*E-gateways may be run as small businesses or within the voluntary*

sector. In either case they tend to be run by people who have an enthusiasm for the use of computers and the Internet, but are also close enough to their users to understand their anxieties and to know how to put people at ease. This helps to realise their strong commitment to extending access to new users."

Similarly, a recent evaluation of learning centres in Britain found that *"learning centres can play a crucial role for [disadvantaged] learners, by providing a context sensitive to their needs, providing unambiguous and individually-pertinent opportunities, and smoothing the transition to further learning in a more formal setting. Such work deserves the patient support of policymakers if it is to be realised"* (Harris and Dudley, 2000).

The evaluation report suggested that access to ICTs at local level should consider a matrix of provision - a range of access opportunities both institutional and community-based, formal and informal - to meet the range of demand in each community. In this framework, community provision of ICT access allows support in a familiar and comfortable place. However community-based providers should not necessarily try to duplicate the more formal and institutional access opportunities available elsewhere.

Studies carried out in the US on the Community Technology Centres (CTCs) highlighted that an encouraging atmosphere is important for introducing disadvantaged groups to ICTs (Mark et al., 1997, Chow et al., 2000). In addition, these studies suggested the social capital value of some CTCs in engendering a feeling of community, as adults learn ICTs skills together and form friendships with other learners. A wider social capital value was indicated as the CTCs formed closer working relationships with other community agencies, such as local employment centres, seniors centres, and rehabilitation agencies.

The literature review found few examples of successful online support networks for disadvantaged groups in Europe. A notably successful example of this has been in Halifax, Canada, where disadvantaged single mothers provided with computers and free access to an online support network successfully used the system to reduce their stress, share information, and build a strong peer support network (Dunham et al, 1998).

Increasing Capacity And Demand For Distance Learning

"Our community support staff provide one-to-one support for new users when they first come through the door. They have a short questionnaire to work through to figure out where people are at, is it a lack of confidence or they don't have IT skills. In many cases the skills are there - people just don't have the confidence to use them. We are working with the local college to deliver the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and our basic courses are aimed at encouraging people to go onto the ECDL, and that's working very well. The local college has three outreach campuses which we work with very closely in the communities, and other communities are now pushing the college to deliver things out to them. Also people in the communities now have the IT confidence to use computers for distance learning, so it's increasing their capacity and their demand.
[Quote from the interviews]

**Alternative To Internet Access
In Libraries**

"Unemployed people or individuals who have been excluded identify with our [voluntary] organisation. They find it much easier to come here than for example their local library. Many of them have never visited their local library, and our basic skills unit introduce students to the local library. There is something about people connecting and feeling comfortable in their local environment. We build ICT into all our basic skills programmes and try and encourage people who access us for whatever reason to learn about computers. It also goes well beyond the people who attend courses. It goes into the families, into the communities - you find a whole knock-on effect where friends and relatives and friends of friends are enquiring about courses."
[Quote from the interviews]

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents reported that many people experiencing disadvantage lack confidence in their own abilities and need support to begin to use computers and the Internet. Voluntary organisations provide support for computer use as an extension of their general support work with disadvantaged groups.

This occurs by making training and contact around computers as supportive as possible, often through one-to-one support. Many people lack the confidence to deal with online or telephone support services or cannot afford such services. Support also includes ensuring that concrete supports such as childcare are available to participants of ICT awareness and training programmes.

One effective approach to support has been to create an environment for peer support networks to develop among people experiencing disadvantage; this can be successful for maintaining commitment to ICT training programmes. Peer support networks initiated in a community or voluntary sector setting can

radiate out further into disadvantaged communities, so that ICT skills learned are passed on to friends and family members.

Funding and Partnership

Introduction

According to the EC report on the voluntary sector (1997), a primary challenge facing voluntary organisations is that public authorities have devolved a wide range of public service provision to the voluntary sector without providing adequate resources to deliver these services. Significantly, the EC study found that for most voluntary organisations lack of funding was their biggest problem. Funding for ICT initiatives by voluntary organisations was a central theme in the interviews.

A related challenge is building effective partnerships to increase inclusion in the information society - involving voluntary organisations, government and public agencies, and private and commercial organisations. The thinking behind the partnership approach is that partnerships between the state, commercial and voluntary sectors enhance the ability of each to build a more inclusive information society.

Partnerships between the voluntary and state sectors in Europe have become more prevalent since the early 1990s as governments have sought to radically reform systems of welfare and state benefits. The scope and organisation of partnerships vary widely among Member States. Analysts of the partnership approach have stressed the need to involve local communities from the very beginning in setting up the processes and identifying schemes having clear benefits for local people (Atkinson, 2000; Finn, 2000).

A recent European Commission Staff Working Paper on lifelong learning (2000e) has highlighted partnerships as a way to put lifelong learning into practice, stating that: "*The key to success will be to build on a sense of shared responsibility for lifelong learning among all the key actors - the Member States, the European institutions, the Social Partners and the world of enterprise; regional and local authorities, those who work in education and training of all kinds, civil society organisations, associations and groupings; and, last but not least, individual citizens themselves.*"

The initiative to address the digital divide by the G8 countries - Digital Opportunities Task Force, or DOT Force Initiative - encourages a partnership approach with the "third sector," with voluntary organisations taking a central role. The DOT Force Initiative believes that the transition to the information society involves close collaboration among three categories of stakeholders: public, private and third sector. The third sector's role is "*to promote the wider participation and transformation of society*" (La Chappelle, 2000).

The discussion below addresses three questions: What have been the experiences of voluntary organisations with funding and partnerships for initiatives addressing inclusion in the information society:

- With the public sector?
- With the private sector? and
- Other funding and partnership experiences?

Experiences with the Public Sector

What have been the voluntary sector's experiences with the public sector regarding funding and partnerships for initiatives addressing inclusion in the information society?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: Reports from Britain have highlighted the barriers and restraints for voluntary organisations related to public funding and provisions attached to funding. Clarke (1998) found that: *Many of the organisations that provide IT awareness events for disadvantaged groups have almost constant problems seeking funds to maintain their work, sometimes operating with little financial support beyond a month or two ahead.* Specific findings included that support costs should be three times the hardware costs, and that funders are generally unwilling to provide adequate support costs.

Another report (Day and Harris, 1997) found that obtaining sustainable funding for community-based ICT training projects was an ongoing challenge for many projects and was in some cases impossible. Public funding for some community-based ICT projects required people receiving welfare benefits to participate in training in order to continue receiving their benefits; participants were not necessarily motivated and absenteeism and related problems were common. Other difficulties included obtaining high-quality equipment and high-speed broadband access in

Challenges To Acquiring State-Sector Funds

A voluntary organisation in Bulgaria developed a project to create an information network for volunteers and voluntary organisations working with people with disabilities. While preparing the funding application, they met numerous times with the potential funder, a state agency, to discuss the application process and requirements. One month after the deadline, the state agency informed the voluntary organisation by fax that the project was not accepted - because the application form was not filled in properly.
[From the interviews]

community-based training centres; funders often assumed that such programmes could be run with outdated equipment and inferior telecommunications infrastructure (Day and Harris, 1997).

Recent analysis of the Digital City in Amsterdam (Lovink and Riemens, 2000) highlighted the difficulty of funding such initiatives. Amsterdam's Digital City was ultimately not able to sustain itself with public funds and voluntary inputs and was eventually turned over to the private sector. Since that time, the emphasis on community-building and public service has decreased. This experience points to the difficulty of maintaining online services for disadvantaged groups without adequate public funding.

Turning to partnership approaches with the public sector, one study of community-based strategies for IT

and social inclusion in Britain states that: *"as the infrastructure of digital networks is being planned and put in place, usually by local authority-led partnerships, the early involvement of the community and voluntary agencies is essential to ensure the widest possible access, development of content, acquisition of skills, and distribution of benefits"* (Day and Harris, 1997). Another report states that: *"in many cases, the authenticity and openness of some partnerships is in question. It is essential that they are open to both the community and voluntary sectors from the outset"* (INSINC, 1997).

In the US, comprehensive evaluations were carried out for the Department of Commerce of two government-funded programmes aimed primarily at increasing the use of ICTs by disadvantaged groups: TOP (Technologies Opportunities Program) (Westat, 2000), and the TIIAP (Telecommunications and Information Infrastructure Assistance Program) (Westat, 1999). The reports highlighted the challenges faced by non-profit community-based organisations in implementing such projects, in particular the challenges of forming an effective partnership with local agencies and organisations.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Respondents indicated that voluntary organisations across Europe are involved in a range of funding and partnership arrangements with the state and public sectors on initiatives to increase inclusion in the information society.

State and public funding opportunities have increased since the late 1990s, as governments have made an inclusive information society a more central policy initiative, and as infrastructure developments and lower costs have increased opportunities for access by disadvantaged groups and in rural areas. However obtaining adequate funding remains a significant restraint to the development of voluntary sector projects for a more inclusive information society.

Respondents from voluntary organisations in the Nordic region reported the most positive experiences overall with state sector funding and support of ICT initiatives. Until recently, some governments in Eastern Europe were reluctant to fund voluntary sector initiatives to increase ICT opportunities in rural areas, given the low level of infrastructure in these areas; this situation has improved in recent years. Several respondents from Eastern Europe reported lack of transparency in the funding process and lack of follow-through on verbal commitments to funding, and also a general lack of support for the work of voluntary organisations in certain fields. Where direct financial support has not been possible, governments in Eastern Europe have in some cases provided other direct supports for voluntary sector ICT initiatives, such as office and training space in unoccupied public buildings at no cost.

Funding Challenges For Women's Organisations

"Generally my experience working with government and the private sector is that we are not taken seriously around IT. We have experience of banging on the door of government with in one hand quotes, reports and statistics saying that there are IT skills gaps, employment gaps, and on the other hand we are saying - here's a project, fund this project, we're working to address these gaps - and it's very difficult to get this funding. It's partly that we're coming from the community and voluntary sector, and on top of that we're a women's organisation. I really feel you have to work twice as hard to make yourself heard and twice as hard to prove yourself if you're a woman. I can think of experiences that go way back even to the first set of laptops that was bought for a training project for rural women. I spent a lot of time doing research into which laptops to buy (and I'm an experienced IT professional), and when it came to funding the project, the government agency would not fund the computers until we went to a commercial IT organisation and got some guy out that charged a huge fortune to sit at a meeting and OK the spec. It's just that kind of experience all the time."

[Quote from the interviews]

Risks Involved In Government Funding

A voluntary organisation in Spain working with ICTs and disadvantaged youth believes that their dependence on government funding carries clear risks. Increasingly, the government influences the objectives and content of their programmes, which is moving them away from their original objective of responding to perceived social problems and needs. They and other voluntary organisations have taken on social welfare programmes that were previously the responsibility of government bodies. As a result, they are moving more towards a commercial model. The voluntary organisation is attempting to address this problem by playing two roles - carrying out the functions that the government decides are priorities, and at the same time trying to find funding and volunteers for those projects which they believe are also social priorities. Their hope is that over time, the government will come to share their ideas and thus be more willing to fund or take on these projects themselves.

[From the interviews]

Significant challenges for voluntary organisations include making the state and public agencies more aware of the opportunities for using ICTs to increase social inclusion. National-level funding opportunities can be competitive in a way that discourages partnership and resource-sharing within the voluntary sector.

Respondents reported that some specific problems related to national-level funding include funds not adequate to cover ongoing maintenance and support and overhead costs, thus jeopardising project sustainability. Funding can also be tied to specific national programmes, thus limiting a project's wider application. National-level funding may only be available to projects hiring or training certain categories of disadvantaged groups.

Where local governments fund projects, mostly positive experiences were reported. However, the funding is usually quite low and cash-flow difficulties common. Funding can be less than applied for, forcing projects to adapt to local government priorities - not necessarily the priorities of disadvantaged groups. Local governments and agencies may not have decision-making authority and thus delay project implementation. Another problem reported with local funding is that local authorities may want to claim ownership of the ICT project, even if their contribution has been minimal.

Several respondents reported that they did not seek or receive funding from the state, believing that this would interfere with developing their own priorities. Other organisations reported that they have consistently applied and been rejected for state funding due to priorities and objectives considered too radical by the state.

Partnerships reported on a national level include joint activities with a range of government departments and national agencies. Activities range from organising conferences on information society issues to joint development of online content and Web sites, or simply agreements to link information on the Web sites of both governments and voluntary organisations.

In general, respondents reported that networking with state sector departments and public agencies is easy but that building working relationships is much more challenging, because of different organisational cultures. Building "partnerships"

among organisations with unequal power relations will always be difficult. For this reason, partnerships are often ad-hoc or short-term. Building ongoing partnerships with state-sector organisations is a slow bureaucratic process, involving educating state-sector employees about the needs of disadvantaged groups related to ICTs. One successful partnership model in Scotland involves community directors appointed by local voluntary organisations.

Several respondents working on information society projects have received funding from EU institutions, through a wide range of funding mechanisms. They report that such funding for voluntary sector ICT projects has been much more difficult to access in recent years, particularly since national governments have become more proactive in funding information society initiatives. Preparing an EU-level proposal is seen as very time-consuming and expensive and often requiring outside expertise. For voluntary organisations new to EU-level work, the most common difficulty reported including finding clear information about the opportunities available and finding partners in other European countries for the proposals, especially for organisations that work on a local level.

Experiences with the Private Sector

What have been the voluntary sector's experiences with the private sector regarding funding and partnerships for initiatives addressing inclusion in the information society?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH: In the US, the partnership approach has focused more strongly on the commercial sector's role. The US Department of Commerce believes that a partnership approach is essential to delivering "digital progress and prosperity," stating that "*In partnership with businesses and civil society, we have succeeded in dramatically increasing the connectivity of our citizens and their access to opportunity*" (USDoC, 2000c). In the context of partnerships to bridge the digital

Voluntary Organisation Discouraged From Applying for European Union Funding

A voluntary organisation in Spain providing ICT services to other voluntary organisations was involved in an EU-funded project to develop ICT applications to fight social exclusion. Although there were some positive outcomes, the organisation's overall experience with the project was negative. "The organisation that managed the EU project was a consulting company that had no experience at all with the disadvantaged groups. They were out for the money, basically." The Spanish voluntary organisation is discouraged from developing its own EU project because it lacks information. "It is horrendously difficult to know what you can apply for. The EU Web site is a maze and I don't find it at all clear - you have to wade through enormous documents to find out what's available." [Quotes from the interviews]

Common Interests Lead To Private Sector Support

A voluntary organisation in Hungary supporting a network of telecottages, many in small communities in underprivileged areas, has received limited but vital support from the private sector. On a local level, a company supports a community telecottage as a way to achieve conservation of the labour force. At a regional level, Internet service providers offer subsidised Internet fees. At a national level, a major US-based multinational provides software and books at discount prices and the major Hungarian telecommunications company provides subsidised Internet access. The voluntary organisation believes the key to private sector support is identifying the common interests between the players. [From the interviews]

divide, "partnership" has been defined as: "a mutual supportive arrangement between organizations, agencies, businesses and/or communities with the purpose of addressing a problematic situation" (Kearns, 2001). Other reports from the US have continued this theme.

The growing interest in voluntary-commercial sector partnerships in the US is demonstrated by two recent publications from the Harvard Business School on this topic (Sagawa and Segal, 2000; Austin, 2000). One includes a case study of partnership between Microsoft and the American Library Association, a non-profit organisation. The Libraries Online partnership involved Microsoft donating equipment and technical expertise and supporting the development of training materials for introducing computers into public libraries in nine low-income communities (Sagawa and Segal, 2000). Libraries Online was such a success in extending computer use to disadvantaged groups that Microsoft chief Bill Gates personally donated US \$200 million towards its replication and later, with his wife Melissa Gates, established the Gates Library Foundation to take the program to half the public libraries in the US.

Little analysis has been conducted of partnerships for a more inclusive information society in Europe. Evaluation of a project funded by the EU-EMPLOYMENT Initiative in Ireland, which provided community-based training in Microsoft Certifications (MCP) for unemployed people, found that the partnership with Microsoft Ireland had contributed to its success but also highlighted some pitfalls of this arrangement (O'Donnell, 1998). A study from Britain noted that "*engaging commercial organisations is often difficult and time-consuming, with uncertain reward, and consequently there is little incentive for projects to invest their energies*" (Harris and Dudley, 2000).

Receiving Support From Local Commercial Organisations

A voluntary organisation in Bulgaria supporting the development of young people in need operates an Internet training centre. A local commercial Internet service provider gives it a discount rate for the Internet centre. Two small businesses - a photography studio and a restaurant - provide space free of charge to organise seminars and lectures. The voluntary organisation also worked with a local business on a project to support organisations that work with people with disabilities, in particular, to increase their access to social spaces such as the Internet centre.
[From the interviews]

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: According to the respondents, support from private sector organisations in Europe is not common for ICT projects aimed at disadvantaged groups. Local businesses are generally more supportive than large companies in ICT sector industries, of ICT projects run by the voluntary sector. Local businesses in some areas provide small amounts of funding for specific projects and offer expertise and resources including computer support, training, and training facilities at low or no cost.

Voluntary organisations make repeated attempts to obtain funding and support from the private sector, especially large ICT companies, with little result. Respondents believe that the poor response is due to not having senior contacts within the organisations and that large organisations, especially multi-national companies, do not see the benefits of supporting ICT initiatives in the voluntary sector. Some specific areas

may be unpopular, such as support for ICT initiatives for drug users. Respondents working with women's organisations reported that they are not taken seriously in their requests for project support from large ICT companies.

Reported notable exceptions in Britain include British Telecom, IBM, and Microsoft, who have supported initiatives through targeted programmes or supply of discounted software or hardware. In some regions, Internet Service Providers and telecoms companies support voluntary sector initiatives by providing services at discounted rates. Some banks and insurance companies are also supporting these initiatives on a small scale. Respondents who have been successful at obtaining funding from the private sector reported that this process is generally more fair, with decisions taken more quickly, compared to funding from state-sector sources.

On the other hand, one respondent reported that his organisation did not seek commercial funding, believing that it would jeopardise its non-profit orientation. Other respondents believed that project funding from commercial organisations would lead to requests from these organisations for more project control and commercial exploitation of the processes developed.

Some respondents reported they have entered into sponsorship relationships, rather than partnerships with commercial organisations; an example is a commercial company wanting to be associated with ICT initiatives for people with disabilities, in order to increase its profile among disabled people and make its services more accessible.

Voluntary organisations also enter into partnership arrangements with commercial organisations for research and development of ICT applications for specific groups of disadvantaged people, such as people with disabilities. In these cases, voluntary organisations can provide users and user feedback for pilot and prototype applications.

Other Funding and Partnerships

What have been the voluntary sector's experiences regarding other funding and partnerships for initiatives addressing inclusion in the information society?

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS: Funding from other sources for voluntary sector ICT projects includes charities, trusts and foundations. Respondents reported that in general, this funding source has been the most open and least conservative and has been funding ICT projects to increase social inclusion long before funding became available from the state sector or commercial organisations. Where state provision for these activities has increased since the late 1990s the funding from charities, trusts and foundations has generally decreased accordingly.

Outside of European charities, trusts and foundations operating on a national level,

sources of funding for projects to increase social inclusion using ICTs in Europe have come from foundations in the Netherlands and Switzerland, the Open Society Foundation operating in Eastern Europe, and foundations and agencies in the US and Canada including the Peace Corps, USAID, and the IDRC (International Development Research Centre) in Ottawa.

A respondent from a campaigning organisation is involved in partnerships and working relationships with a range of organisations and politicians, at European level and wider internationally. This voluntary organisation works with the social platform for European NGOs, committees of the European Parliament, the G8 consultations and with the World Bank - any group working towards a common goal. She believes that successful partnerships are built on transparency, consultation, equality and respect - also elements of good relationships. Other respondents believe also that partnership arrangements have a better chance of succeeding when all partners clearly articulate their objectives and desired outcomes.

Ways Forward

Overview of the Role of Voluntary Organisations

The study found that voluntary organisations do play an important role in fostering a more inclusive information society in Europe. The extent of this activity cannot be quantified - some but obviously not all voluntary organisations are engaged in it.

Three key roles played by voluntary organisations were identified. Voluntary organisations across Europe can take on one, two, or all three roles, to various degrees, depending on the aims of the organisations, the specific social, cultural and political contexts of their work, the needs of the groups and communities they serve and represent, and the dynamic between their organisations and local and national authorities and government.

The three key roles identified by the study are:

- Champion
- Mediator
- Supporter

Champions are voluntary organisations delivering support and services aimed at encouraging access and effective use of ICTs by people experiencing disadvantage. This can also involve providing content on the Internet that meets the needs of disadvantaged groups and also encouraging disadvantaged groups to produce content on the Internet themselves.

Champions use up-to-date technology in their own organisations, including networked computers and internal email systems and file sharing. Their staff and volunteers are skilled with computers and they may have technical support staff within their organisations.

Champions develop basic computer training programmes for people experiencing disadvantage that meet their specific needs and include supports such as childcare and transportation. They can work with state providers of training to develop and deliver these courses, or deliver them themselves.

Voluntary organisations playing the champion role participate in coordinated local approaches to delivering computer training to people experiencing disadvantage. They can seek out funding and opportunities to provide local ICT training centres with public Internet access and can themselves run these centres.

Champions are aware of opportunities for sustainable employment using ICTs and if such opportunities exist locally, can develop and deliver programmes for high-end ICT training to people experiencing disadvantage.

Champions are innovators, developing computer applications and processes, and training programmes for specific aspects of their work with disadvantaged groups, or for campaigning work generally. They can develop ICT applications with the input of people experiencing disadvantage and with specific awareness of their needs. Champions can be involved in research and development projects with industrial partners developing applications to meet the needs of the disadvantaged groups they work with.

Challenges For Local Champions

"The whole issue of "local champions" needs to be addressed. We did some IT awareness sessions in low income neighbourhoods and were finding that often someone would come forward who wasn't necessarily a techie, but who had a vision and understood the potential of this technology as far as local people were concerned. These people would put in all sorts of hours of help and support - that was champions emerging. Immediately, issues arise, for example one of them quickly got a job and that was that; it was great for that individual but those skills were lost from the community. Another issue that arises is: Should they be paid? Once volunteers are paid, you change their relationship both in terms of the organisation concerned and with the community. We were particularly concerned with how you nurture and support these people and provide them with training if they need it, because their contribution can often be immense and under-recognised."
[Quote from the interviews]

Champions are in a continuous process of applying for funding for their ICT projects. Funding and funding challenges can consume a considerable level of time and resources. Champions can be continuously re-designing projects for which full funding was not granted, re-applying for funding for projects that were not funded, attempting to find matching funding from other sources, and trying to scale down projects where possible. Champions can make repeated attempts to get funding from the private sector, especially from large ICT companies, with little success.

Champions are actively involved in short-term or longer-term partnership arrangements with local authorities or government agencies to deliver programmes involving ICTs and social inclusion.

Champions monitor government Web sites and look for opportunities to participate in online policy and consultation processes. They can consult members of the disadvantaged groups they work with while developing policy responses so as to include their voices in the online process.

Champions are involved in the development of information society policies at national level, especially policies for an inclusive information society. They can contribute their expertise to policy and programme development in areas including: awareness

campaigns, training programmes, public Internet access points, employment in ICT industries for disadvantaged groups, Internet access and rights to access, computer applications for disadvantaged groups, and research on social inclusion in the information society.

Champions actively seek improvement in the quality of information available online from government and public authorities, challenging authorities when necessary to make this information available and then using the information appropriately in their work. Champions use email to communicate with public officials.

Champions actively work with governments and public authorities to develop content relevant to their constituents, using their expertise and knowledge of the particular needs of the disadvantaged groups they work with. They will aim for content that is accessible and relevant.

Champions have Web sites to make information available that is useful for people experiencing disadvantage, and to people seeking information about social inclusion more generally. They keep their Web sites updated and relevant.

Champions are active producers of alternative or community media, working not only through the Internet and the Web but also radio, newspapers and other venues to bring their concerns and those of the groups they work with to the wider public sphere.

Champions actively use the Internet to link up with other champions, building networks and coalitions of voluntary organisations working on social inclusion issues, and specifically issues of using ICTs to increase social inclusion.

Mediators are voluntary organisations acting as front-line conduits between disadvantaged groups and ICTs. They look for opportunities to encourage people experiencing disadvantage to use computers and the Internet or make some of the benefits available to them. They mediate online content about government information and services, putting it into contexts that are relevant for the disadvantaged groups they work with.

Mediators look for opportunities to encourage people experiencing disadvantage to use computers and the Internet or at least to make some of the benefits of the Internet available to them. This includes ensuring that staff and volunteers are given adequate and ongoing training in computer applications and Internet use. Mediators can also support advanced computer training for staff and volunteers who ask for it.

Mediators are aware of computer training opportunities available locally and look for opportunities to make members of disadvantaged groups aware of these opportunities. They can negotiate and arrange childcare or transportation arrangements to allow women caring for children access to these courses.

Voluntary organisations that provide literacy training are mediators when they use computers as part of this training.

Mediators working with people with disabilities are up-to-date on the latest assistive technologies for computer and Internet use and make this information known to their client group, facilitating access to these technologies where possible.

Mediators mediate online content about government information and services. They can use the Web to access timely government information about the disadvantaged groups they work with and then make this information available, either by printing it out and handing it over, posting it up on bulletin boards in common areas, or conducting informal sessions with the individuals themselves in front of a computer screen. Mediators can interpret government information found online, put it into a language accessible to the individuals they work with, explain the implications of the information, and respond to questions.

Mediators also use government information found online as sources for developing their own information for the disadvantaged groups they work with. If they have Web pages, they can provide links to the relevant government sites.

Voluntary organisations playing the mediator role use email and email discussion groups to network with other voluntary organisations working on similar issues. They can share information about their own activities and learn from the experiences of other mediators.

Supporters are voluntary organisations that support the use of ICTs by disadvantaged groups as a natural extension of their overall work with these groups. Supporters play this role primarily through their social capital function - providing a sense of trust and common purpose, in this case in the use of computers and the Internet. Voluntary organisations can be supporters even if their own use of computers and the Internet is not sophisticated or extensive.

Supporter is the most common role played by voluntary organisations in encouraging a more inclusive information society in Europe. Supporters can be mediators or even champions in some areas, or aspire to be champions.

Voluntary organisations play a supporting role simply by including an email or Web page address in their written communications with members of disadvantaged groups and thus increasing awareness of the use of these technologies.

The supporting role is played when individuals experiencing disadvantage meet with staff or volunteers from the voluntary organisations and see computers and the Internet used in practical tasks. In particular, women experiencing disadvantage can be introduced to computers and the Internet through their contact with voluntary organisations. The supporting role includes facilitating informal access to computers and the Internet and aiding and assisting computer and Internet use informally.

Implications for Voluntary Organisations

The most important implication of the study for voluntary organisations is the need to discuss and share experiences among champions on a national, European and international level. Information sharing will help to improve the quality of programmes and services to increase the use of ICTs by disadvantaged groups and provide online content that meets the needs of these groups.

The study Web page www.models-research.ie/projects/vsiis.html is a useful starting point and focus for this networking.

Champions need to be reviewing and evaluating their ICT projects and programmes on an ongoing basis to ensure they are meeting the needs of the target disadvantaged groups. Evaluation will involve seeking the views and experiences of the users, learners and participants in the programmes.

Champions need to be continually improving information and communications processes within their organisations, including training and supports for staff and volunteers.

Champions could be more actively lobbying for increased recognition of their role in policy aimed at improving inclusion in the information society. This would involve participating on committees and processes to develop more inclusive policies in this area.

Implications for Information Society Policies

National Level Information Society Policy

In every European nation, voluntary organisations work and operate in specific social, cultural and political contexts. The clear implication of the study for national information policy is that voluntary organisations have a role to play in increasing inclusion in the information society. The policy task is to facilitate and develop that role where possible.

Voluntary Organisations Should Take A More Active Role In IT Awareness And Use

"I'd like to see the community and voluntary sector have a much more pervasive role in rolling out IT to their members, through volunteers, through membership, through training. They're the people who know the difficulties - the literacy problems, the disability problems, the fear problems - and they'll be able to get around those. People are not just going to go and sign up for computer courses if they've been long-term unemployed or they've been working in the home for a long time. Many people don't understand the relevance of IT for them, the elderly for example, and it can be a huge benefit. I think the community sector is the best positioned sector to try and roll that out to local people."

[Quote from the interviews]

Improving ICT Training For Disadvantaged Groups

The National Organisation for Adult Learning (NIACE) in the UK has several publications aimed at voluntary organisations planning to deliver ICT training, or improving existing training programmes. Their recent publication, *First Steps* (Clarke, 2001) includes useful information and tips on improving delivery approach, outreach, the learning environment, and many other areas. For more information, visit the NIACE Web site: www.niace.org.uk

Facilitating the **champion** role played by voluntary organisations centres on policies to support innovative programmes and projects delivered by voluntary organisations to increase the use of ICTs by disadvantaged groups. It also involves forming strong relationships with champions at national and local level and developing partnerships at all levels on projects and programmes to increase inclusion in the information society.

Facilitating champions includes working together to develop local and national plans for community access to computers and the Internet - developing a matrix of provision for local areas in which community centres, voluntary organisations, libraries, schools, and public authorities all have a role to play in providing these services at levels appropriate to their particular expertise.

CAIT Projects In Ireland Managed By Community And Voluntary Organisations

The Irish Government recently allocated more than EUR 5 million for the CAIT Initiative (Community Application of Information Technology) to bring new ICTs to people who are unfamiliar with, and who do not use, the new technologies in their everyday lives. CAIT projects are managed by community and voluntary organisations, as a way of harnessing "the experience, local knowledge, and relationships of the community and voluntary sector." The 71 demonstration projects across Ireland, in both rural and urban areas, are working with the most disadvantaged groups in the country to support their transition to a more active role in the information society. The projects run until the end of 2002. More information is available on the CAIT Web site: www.cait.ie

Facilitating champions involves inviting them to participate in the development of ICT training programmes for disadvantaged groups and other initiatives to increase the use of computers and the Internet for these groups. This includes working with champions to find ways to support ICT training for individuals experiencing disadvantage who do not fit into the traditional "categories" of disadvantage.

It involves recognising the expertise of champions with ICTs and disadvantaged groups, and using that expertise when developing policies on an inclusive information society, for example by inviting champions to participate on committees or as advisors to policy development.

Facilitating champions also involves actively encouraging large ICT companies to develop corporate social responsibility policies and programmes centred on funding or subsidising ICT initiatives run by voluntary organisations. It also involves facilitating introductions between senior management in relevant ICT organisations and senior management in champion voluntary organisations.

Facilitating champions involves working with them to develop accessible and relevant online content on government services and information for disadvantaged groups, including appropriate delivery of this content in different formats. This includes content on health issues for disadvantaged groups. It also involves supporting initiatives from voluntary organisations developing and community media opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

Facilitating champions includes recognising and valuing the work of voluntary organisations that support disadvantaged groups outside national borders, such as those organisations using the Internet to develop transnational and international support networks on human rights issues.

Facilitating the **mediator** role played by voluntary organisations centres on policies for building strong communication and information networks with the voluntary sector and using these networks to make information available on services, programmes and opportunities for disadvantaged groups. It also involves actively engaging with voluntary organisations in their efforts to improve their ICT capacity.

This includes making information available to voluntary organisations about ICT training opportunities for staff and volunteers and for disadvantaged groups. This also includes responding to requests for more information about these opportunities and supporting training provision through funding and subsidies for training costs, childcare and transportation costs.

Facilitating mediators involves encouraging local businesses and large organisations involved in ICTs to develop programmes and policies to support ICT use by voluntary organisations. This could include making businesses aware of the ICT needs of voluntary organisations suggesting ways to address these needs, and facilitating introductions between businesses and voluntary organisations.

Facilitating the mediator role involves making information available to voluntary organisations on new ICT applications designed for disadvantaged groups, such as computer programmes for literacy training.

Facilitating mediators includes engaging with voluntary organisations who request that certain government or public authority information be put online. It involves soliciting feedback from voluntary organisations on the usefulness and relevance of government information online, and responding to the feedback offered. It also involves seeking opportunities to link government Web sites to those of voluntary organisations and asking voluntary organisations with Web pages to provide links to government sites.

Facilitating the **supporter** role played by voluntary organisations centres on policies for building ICT capacity within voluntary organisations. This involves developing funding mechanisms and programmes to increase the use of computers and the Internet by voluntary organisations. Funding

Are Information Society Policy Forums Useful For Disadvantaged Groups?

A voluntary organisation in Spain with experience participating in policy debates on the information society is sceptical about the usefulness of such forums. Its experience is that the policies formed are premised on, and limited to, the need to create a market for the ICT sectors. It is very difficult to introduce a consideration of the non-commercial sectors and the needs of disadvantaged groups. It believes the government should be obliged to allocate a certain percentage of spending on ICT development to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups.

[From the interviews]

should cover computer hardware, software, ongoing support and maintenance, and ongoing training for staff and volunteers. In some areas, this may include supporting the development of an ICT support structure within the voluntary sector that would provide technical support appropriate to the specific needs of the sector.

Whenever possible, these programmes and policies developed at national level should be delivered and administered by local governments and authorities who are familiar with the local environment of the voluntary organisations and the disadvantaged groups they work with.

Facilitating the supporter role also implies that public authorities involved in these funding mechanisms and programmes use email and the Web as much as possible when communicating with voluntary organisations, to encourage their use of these technologies.

EU Information Society Policy

Voluntary organisations have a range of contributions to make to a more inclusive information society in Europe. The *eEurope* Initiative is the central policy on the information society at EU level. Voluntary organisations are not specifically acknowledged in the current version of *eEurope*, although they were recognised in earlier EU information society policy developed by the High Level Expert Group in 1997.

Voluntary organisations should be returned to *eEurope* policy, specifically for their role in fostering an inclusive information society. The current version of *eEurope* identifies the primary actors in information society development as the Member States, the Social Partners, the Private Sector, and the European Commission. The role of voluntary organisations could be acknowledged broadly in *eEurope* in two ways: including voluntary organisations alongside the Social Partners, or alternatively, adding "Civil Society" as a new category of primary actors in information society development in Europe.

Is There Room For Voluntary Organisations In EU Information Society Policy?

"EU policy sees the Internet as a market, and the only important activity as company activity. I would like to see them opening up their ideas and being more responsive to all sorts of other organisations - like universities, NGOs, community groups. There's a lot that people can offer. When the whole structure of their policy is oriented towards business then it's very hard to get in anywhere."

[Quote from the interviews]

The study underlines the need for the exchange of information and experiences among organisations working to improve social inclusion in the information society. *eEurope* could stimulate this process by providing some kind of focus - such as a network - of organisations working in this area.

Looking at the specific objectives and targets for *eEurope*, the study has implications for elements of two core objectives of *eEurope*: Investing in people and skills; and Stimulating the use of the Internet. The elements with a role for voluntary organisations are: Working in the knowledge-based economy, Government online, and Participation for all in the knowledge-based economy.

In the area of **working in the knowledge-based economy:**

- *An existing action in eEurope is to give the labour force the chance to become digitally literate through life-long learning.* Voluntary organisations are an important source of employment across Europe and should be recognised as contributors to *eEurope* targets in this area.
- *An existing action in eEurope is to significantly increase information technology training places and courses using European Union funds where appropriate.* Voluntary organisations are delivering ICT training programmes for people experiencing disadvantage, some of which are aimed at sustainable employment in the information society. These initiatives should be recognised and encouraged with *eEurope* targets.
- *An existing action in eEurope is to set up public Internet access points in public spaces and establish multi-media telecentres in all communities providing access to training and e-work facilities, where appropriate using Structural Funds.* Voluntary organisations are participating in coordinated local approaches to delivering computer training to people experiencing disadvantage and may themselves be delivering training. This work should be acknowledged and encouraged with *eEurope* targets.

In the area of **government online:**

- *An existing action in eEurope is to make essential public data available online including legal, administrative, cultural, environmental and traffic information.* Government information online for people experiencing disadvantage needs to be improved. Voluntary organisations are mediating government content online to meet the particular needs of the people experiencing disadvantage. This mediation work should be recognised, supported and developed with *eEurope* targets.
- *An existing action in eEurope is to ensure that generalised electronic access to basic public services exists in Member States.* Voluntary organisations are playing an important role in fostering the use of computers, the Internet, and government information and services online by people experiencing disadvantage. This role should be recognised, supported and developed with *eEurope* targets.

In the area of **participation for all in the knowledge-based economy:**

- *The following new action could be added to eEurope: Support and promote efforts by voluntary organisations to build their capacity to use ICTs.* Voluntary organisations are supporting computer and Internet use among disadvantaged groups as an extension of their work with these groups; they need significant capacity-building in ICTs to continue and expand this work. This should be acknowledged and encouraged with *eEurope* targets.

On a broader level, outside the *eEurope Initiative*, the study identified implications for an EU-level policy response in other areas:

- The campaign for "Internet rights" for civil society is developing support across Europe (GreenNet, 2001). The key aspects of the Internet Rights campaign are: the right to communicate; the right to free speech and debate on matters of public interest; protection of privacy; open democratic processes in setting Internet standards; and building civil society alliances for cyberspace.
- The need to encourage companies to take a more pro-active role in supporting voluntary sector efforts towards an inclusive information society. This area is perhaps best addressed in the ongoing efforts already underway to encourage companies to show greater social responsibility alongside profits when making business decisions, as outlined in the European Commission's recent (July, 2001) "Green Paper on Corporate Social Responsibility."
- Continuing to encourage the use of European Union funds for ICT projects developed and delivered by voluntary organisations. The European Social Fund (ESF) is an important source of support for the co-financing of social inclusion initiatives. Member States can use the ESF to help build up the capacity of voluntary organisations working with disadvantaged groups.
- Encouraging the use of Community Initiative funding for these projects. Opportunities exist in particular under the EQUAL Initiative (promoting new ways of tackling exclusion, discrimination and inequality in the labour market), and also the LEADER+ Initiative (promoting rural development through local action initiatives) and the URBAN Initiative (encouraging the economic and social regeneration of towns, cities and suburbs in crisis).

Implications for Information Society Research

National Level Research

Research is needed at a national level to understand and develop the role played by voluntary organisations to foster a more inclusive information society.

In the first instance this implies conducting a mapping survey to identify the voluntary organisations playing a champion role in encouraging an inclusive information society, in all regions of the country and at local and national level. After these organisations have been identified, qualitative social research should be conducted to understand their role, and to identify the restraints and barriers to their work and ways to overcome these.

Research on an ongoing basis should include qualitative evaluation of ICT projects run by champion voluntary organisations, featuring interviews and feedback from individuals experiencing disadvantage who are participating in these projects, with an aim to improving the quality and effectiveness of the project outcomes. This should include the impacts on social networks, community development and confidence building.

A next stage for research should be to explore the mediator role, through qualitative research with a national sample of voluntary organisations playing this role. This should include evaluating the processes by which these organisations act to mediate government content online to disadvantaged groups. The objectives of this research should include improving the mechanisms for designing and delivering government services and online content aimed at disadvantaged groups.

A further stage of the research should be to explore the supporter role played by voluntary organisations, particularly to understand the social capital function of voluntary organisations in increasing awareness and trust in information technologies among disadvantaged groups and more widely in disadvantaged communities. This would involve qualitative research in disadvantaged communities, featuring interviews and feedback from a sample of residents and key actors in the community.

EU Level Research

The study did not identify any existing EU-level research into the experiences and needs of people experiencing disadvantage in the information society. Research in this area is vital to developing future policy, programmes and applications on an inclusive information society. In particular, evaluations of EU-funded projects aimed at a more inclusive information society should include qualitative exploration of the experiences of the project participants.

The study raised a number of specific areas where EU-level research would be useful for developing policy and programmes on an inclusive information society.

In the area of **training and employment in the information society:**

- * Research exploring how people from specific disadvantaged groups - such as disadvantaged women - may acquire ICT skills through volunteer activities with voluntary organisations. This research should identify the extent to which voluntary organisations could be targeted with specific supports for outreach and training for this purpose.
- * Research aimed at improving the capacity of voluntary organisations to deliver ICT training to people experiencing disadvantage.

In the area of **democratic participation and online content:**

- Research aimed at improving the production and distribution of community media and other digitalised content by and for disadvantaged groups.
- Research to develop indicators of democratic participation online and methodologies for research in this area, in the context of an inclusive information society.
- Research to improve the participation in online democratic processes of disadvantaged groups.
- Research exploring the implications of various models of Internet communications between disadvantaged citizens and political representatives - such as the "direct democracy" models between citizens and politicians, and mediated models between politicians and voluntary organisations representing citizens. This research should explore the implications for democracy and the public sphere on European level.
- Research into how voluntary organisations can use ICTs to improve their capacity to work towards social inclusion for specific disadvantaged groups, including capacity-building of their organisational processes and networking with other voluntary organisations at European level.
- Research into the challenges facing voluntary organisations in their attempts to make information available on the Internet - about social disadvantage, human rights and other core social issues - and solutions for addressing these challenges.
- Research exploring how voluntary organisations contribute to improving the quality of government information online, and how the collaboration of voluntary organisations and governments may be improved in this area.

In the area of **social capital and participation for all:**

- Research aimed at developing indicators of social capital and methodologies for research in this area, in the context of an inclusive information society.
- Longitudinal, qualitative research on how Internet networks may contribute to improved social capital for disadvantaged groups.

In the area of **funding and partnerships:**

- Research on how funding mechanisms may be improved for voluntary organisations working to improve an inclusive information society.

- Research on the models of partnerships between voluntary organisations and commercial organisations related to projects and programmes for an inclusive information society.

The Sixth Framework Programme of research will begin in 2001 (European Commission, 2001a). The research areas suggested above could be covered by three key priority areas of the Sixth Framework Programme: Policy-oriented research (included under Anticipating the EU's scientific and technological needs); Information Society technologies; and Citizens and governance in the European knowledge-based society. This implies also that voluntary organisations across Europe should be active as partners and user groups in Framework Programme research projects.

In the area of **Policy oriented research and leading-edge topics**, this would include research in support of policy objectives with regard to Information Society and *eEurope*, social policy and employment, and education and training.

In the area of **Information Society Technologies** research, this would include research on technologies for e-government, and also on ambient intelligence systems offering access to an information society for all, whatever their age and situation.

In the area of **Citizens and governance in the European knowledge-based society**, this would include research on options and choices for the development of knowledge-based society, in particular as regards improving the quality of life, employment and labour market policies, life-long education and training, and strengthening social cohesion and sustainable development; and research on the functioning of democracy and new forms of governance (considering the increasing role of civil society and its representatives in the political debate).

Listing of Researchers and Practitioners

A list of researchers and projects in Europe concerned with voluntary organisations, social inclusion and the information society is being developed. We invite anyone who would like to be added to the list to contact us. To keep this list up-to-date and dynamic, we have made it available on the study Web page, at:

www.models-research.ie/projects/vsiis.html

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To facilitate networking, a Web list of European researchers and organisations interested in voluntary organisations, social inclusion, and the information society is being developed:

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