

Commentary to accompany EURIM Social Exclusion Map (Spring 2004)



Slide 1 - Flowchart

This flowchart links together the subsequent slides. We start by identifying the different **Exclusion Agendas** (slide 2) and then we look at these in the context of providing government services online and identify the key **Issues** that seem to be emerging (slide 3). These key issues should in turn inform government policy and so slide 4 outlines some broad **Policy Priorities** that relate to these issues. Slide 5 looks at means of **implementing policy**. Policy is implemented through various media involving a number of actors, from citizens to government, shown on the left hand side of this slide. The right hand side of this slide highlights the areas where the role of ICT is most important, and slides 6 and 7 look at the **role of ICT** in more detail.

Slide 2 – Exclusion Agendas

This slide sets out, in a very simplistic way, some factors that are likely to lead to social exclusion. These are disability, age, isolation, poverty, unemployment, lack of skills, lack of community coherence, race, language and gender. By default, these factors also represent the perspectives from which people might approach the issue of social exclusion, and therefore, the characteristics of different exclusion agendas. The slide allows common elements to be identified between these groups of people, for instance, it shows that social isolation may affect not only those who are geographically remote from people, but also those who are culturally or linguistically different from others in their community, and those who do not have the money to participate in normal social activities. It also identifies the factors that lead to social exclusion among older people are comparable to those of some disabled people - eg deafness and long sightedness are both sensory impairments.

Slide 3 - Issues

If government services are to be delivered effectively to those who need them, three main issues emerge. Firstly, they must be **accessible**. A doctor's surgery that is only open twice a week, or is too busy for people to get an appointment, or is too far away is not an accessible service. Similarly a state-of-the art transport system is not accessible to people if it is too expensive for them to use. So access is the first key issue. However, it is not enough for services to be accessible, they also have to be **usable**. Interfaces must be designed for easy use by as wide a range of people as possible. They must not be written in jargon, or be counter-intuitive to use. Finally, it doesn't matter how user friendly and accessible service interfaces are if the target users are disinterested or disengaged. They may be unwilling to adopt new habits, distrust the system or simply be disengaged from the whole democratic process. Community cohesion or some kind of peer support network is vital for **engagement**, for sharing access and for addressing knowledge gaps.

Slide 4 – Policy Priorities

The three issues identified in Slide 3 (accessibility, usability and engagement) should inform and help define policy priorities. Providing access to services is the first step, and with many government services it should not matter whether access is virtual or physical. This means that **connectivity** and **transport** have to be addressed holistically. Usability and, to an extent engagement, rely on **education** and **inclusive design** – one side of the coin is bringing people up to a level where they can use basic systems and the other side is adapting the technology to the individual. The key to improving engagement is in community coherence, whether that is a virtual or geographical community, and therefore **building sustainable communities** has to be a policy priority, and indeed it is. It would be very useful to compare the Government's stated policies with this approach.

Slide 5 – Policy Implementation

This slide just outlines some of the mechanisms for implementing policy once it has been defined, whether by **legislation** such as the DDA or through **initiatives** like the Beacon Council schemes. The **agents** for policy implementation range from Government to the individual citizen. ICT has a vital role in policy implementation through **enabling technologies**, and indeed, it is difficult to think of a single instance of a non-ICT-enabled initiative.

Slide 6 – ICT – Tackling Social Exclusion

This slide looks in more detail at the role of ICT in tackling social exclusion. Firstly the use that can be made of ICT as an **assessment tool** in terms of monitoring and measuring levels of exclusion, disseminating that information, producing and manipulating data sets. ICT has a rapidly growing role in mapping exclusion through the application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) – effectively the creation of spatial databases – maps that can be queried electronically. Although ICT should never be regarded as a solution in itself, many solutions to Social Exclusion problems are **enabled by ICT**, which for instance can provide new means of access (virtual access from home for those with mobility problems or who are geographically isolated), ICT is an adaptive tool and can be used to personalise interfaces to suit the user. ICT enables the duplication of best practice so it can be communicated and disseminated rapidly. Many ICT based facilities to assist access and usability **already exist** in both hardware and software forms.

Slide 7 – ICT – Creating New Forms of Exclusion

This slide shows the flip side of the coin for ICT. Firstly there is the problem that **technology embeds problems**. People will not necessarily use technology in the way it was intended. The SEU research found that children in deprived neighbourhoods were using ICT for “unpurposeful activities” which did not help them develop the skills they needed and reinforced the gap between them and other children who were guided to more constructive activity. There are counter arguments that, whatever the activity, some useful skills are being developed. Secondly, there are **supply inadequacies** that serve to make the use of ICT a less enjoyable and rewarding experience than it could be, where failures of equipment or poor instructions, poor support and lack of customer aftercare “turn off” all but the most dedicated users. Some of these aspects relate to good customer care, and the ICT industry needs to take lessons from more mature parts of the retail trade and develop a more “John Lewis” approach. Other aspects relate to design, such as the counter intuitive operation of many IT systems (pressing the “Start” button to shut down MS Windows is the most often cited, but is only one of many), and well hidden accessibility settings. Evidence suggests that these are already being taken into account by suppliers and will be addressed in future software issues. Finally, there are two paradoxes that relate to **economic pressures**. Firstly, as more and more people adopt ICT interfaces, less cost-effective means of access may be reduced or scaled down. Once that happens, those who don’t or can’t use online services will truly become excluded. The second, “disintermediation” paradox relates to the way that ICT has dramatically improved Government’s ability to identify and measure exclusion, yet at the same time, Government is less and less able to intervene to ameliorate the problems it can identify, because services are increasingly being delivered by intermediaries to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

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Social Exclusion Map can be found at: <http://www.eurim.org.uk/activities/socialexclusion/ictandse.ppt>