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Building inclusive solutions to improve digital services in Europe

The conference organised by the FPS Social Integration on 13 and 14 March 2024 was a real success, bringing together European experts and decision-makers in search of solutions for inclusive digital services. Two days rich in discussions to fuel the future Belgian and European political agendas.

In Europe, where 46% of people find themselves in a situation of digital vulnerability, the fight against the digital divide is still a major concern. The European action programme entitled "Leading the Way to Europe's Digital Decade" aims to ensure that at least 80% of adults have basic digital skills by 2030. As part of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU, the conference assessed the progress made in promoting digital inclusiveness in Europe.

Towards an inclusive digital future

The conference programme offered a comprehensive examination of the challenges of digital inclusion, with debates between Belgian regional and national ministers, as well as several European ministers, all responsible for policies relating to digital inclusion and skills.

Many experts added their voices to the discussions by focusing on support for people in digital distress, such as women, the elderly or people with disabilities. They also posed the crucial question of who could provide such groups with the best support, government, civil society organisations, or private companies. Artificial intelligence was another topic covered at the conference, which examined the opportunities offered by this technology for improving services to citizens, notably by combating the non-use of social rights.

A diverse range of projects and discussions

Participants had the opportunity to discover a variety of Belgian projects developed by the Public Social Welfare Centres, public authorities (national, local and regional) and non-profit associations. The themes addressed during the presentations included access to digital services, the development of human-centred applications and citizen involvement in the design of digital services. Projects supported by the European Recovery Fund were also presented, underlining the importance of European investment in digital inclusion.

Skills development for all

The second day of the conference highlighted the current and future requirements of the job market in terms of digital skills. By facilitating access to digital resources for vulnerable groups and supporting them in acquiring the necessary skills, we can expand their employment opportunities and access to the job market. This has led to the development of a number of platforms to assess the level of digital skills of the most vulnerable people, guiding them towards training and jobs. To ensure citizens' support in their digital education, it is necessary to work closely with grassroots actors who understand the specific needs of the target groups. Other potential partners include employers and the technology industry.

Recommendations for the future

After this multitude of workshops and expert presentations, the conference closed with a focus on the recommendations aimed at achieving a clear objective: ensuring digital access for all in Europe, while allowing citizens to choose their communication channel with public services (the 'click, call and connect' principle). This principle must be included in a legislative framework to guarantee the protection of citizens. Artificial intelligence must notably help automate social rights and combat non-take-up. Finally, participants also stressed the need to optimise structural funding to ensure the sustainability of digital inclusion initiatives. It is essential to invest in enabling citizens to participate in the digital society.

These recommendations will be presented at the high-level conference on the European Pillar of Social Rights in La Hulpe on 15 and 16 April 2024.



