



## Older persons and digital inclusion in today's information society

### ESU-Statement

#### *Introduction*

“Population ageing is an unprecedented phenomenon in human history. It creates many challenges and opportunities for policy-makers and citizens alike. Demographic challenges are at least as important as the challenges in the fields of climate and technological developments. They effect every area of our lives and transform our societies”. With this opening statement Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, the Member States holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union during the 18-month period from July 2020 to December 2021, introduced their common strategy and ambition “to strive for the full enjoyment of all human rights, for full participation in society, economy, culture and politics and for the well-being of older persons in Europe and in the world”.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, at EU level, several decisions, plans and publications highlighted the overall phenomenon of demographic change and the need for a comprehensive strategy. They are a convincing call to respect the human rights of older persons, in line with the universally recognised Principles and Declarations on the Rights of Older Persons, and the successive international strategies and plans, such as were recently expressed in the ‘UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2021-2030’.<sup>2</sup> The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the older generation and the risks of violations of human rights have shed light on the often hidden domestic situations and special needs of older persons. The pandemic has created an awareness of the way our societies address age and ageing, invited us to reflect on the inequalities and stereotypes and to accept for the future those lessons learnt during the pandemic, not only in the area of health and prevention and preparedness for future

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<sup>1</sup> Trio Presidency Declaration on Ageing, December 2020

<https://www.bmfsfj.de/resource/blob/163906/c2173339af6c7568dbd168b29a31b06e/trio-presidency-declaration-on-ageing-data.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030), (75/131. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2020).

pandemics, but also how our societies are organised and the priorities and values we want to implement in our style of living. Additionally, new impulses were given. Regardless of the unsatisfactory aspects of the fast-rising digital communication against the traditional analogue one, and calling that social and human contacts shall further be maintained and cultivated consequently, more than ever, digital communication, digital information, all kinds of digital instruments are crucial. The increased use of digital tools has shown the opportunities offered by digitalization, but it has also made the digital divide more visible.

In its communication titled '[2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade](#)' the EU Commission outlined the EU's ambition to pursue digitalization policies that empower individuals and businesses towards a human-centred, sustainable and more prosperous digital future<sup>3</sup>. The European vision for 2030 is a digital society where no-one is left behind. Key public services, including access to medical records (*e-records*), must be guaranteed for all.

We support the key targets of the European Commission: matching the seniors' needs and demands, understanding that access to education for basic digital skills should be a right for all EU citizens and lifelong learning should become a reality for all generations. We also highlight the focus on a new "digital poverty", making it imperative to ensure that all citizens in Europe can leverage the digital transformation for a better and more prosperous life.

In order to achieve these targets, the EU is called upon to dedicate concrete funds from the digital agenda to projects for senior citizens, among others to initiate a Europe-wide campaign for an awareness-building program to make seniors understand that the internet will be their future "gateway to the world" and that they should start to deal with it actively.

### ***Older persons' right to actively participate in society.***

For the older generation, digital communication reveals how digitalization challenges the right of participation and self-determination in older age. For many older persons it is an opportunity, but for a very important segment of the older generation it is also a manifest problem that cannot be overcome quickly. The digital divide, the divide between those having digital literacy and those without, increases with age. Older persons remain offline in disproportionate numbers.

A recent EU Fundamental Rights survey, conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)<sup>4</sup>, shows that one in five people (20%) aged 75 years or older in the survey – in 8 of the 27 countries surveyed the survey was done only online - uses the

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<sup>3</sup> Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade (9.3.2021 COM(2021) 118 final): [communication-digital-compass-2030\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> For more information concerning the survey: [FRS Age and Digitalisation results overview \(bmfsfj.de\)](#)

internet at least occasionally, in comparison with 98% of the group of 16–29-year-olds who use it occasionally. A 2018 OECD survey mentioned that only half (49,8%) of older persons aged 65-74 were using the internet, compared to nearly all (95,9%) of young people aged 16-24<sup>5</sup>. A lack of computer skills, low education level, no access to the internet, low income are perceived as obstacles for the use of the internet and are hindering older persons in their autonomy and social participation. This need for inclusion of older generations in the digital era is a multi-fold challenge. We cannot afford to wait to solve the digital integration of older persons in the information society.

In the present statement the ESU highlights the problems and challenges for inclusion in the digital society and calls for immediate solutions. Digital exclusion and social exclusion are intrinsically intertwined, which put older persons at a higher risk of exclusion. Therefore, the ESU can't turn a blind eye to the fact that groups of our fellow-citizens are hindered from developing capabilities to maintain a social life, to access services especially in the health sector, to benefit from efficient product information and cheaper purchasing sources, to enjoy integrity, independence, cultural recreation and being part of today's ever-changing world.

### *The digital divide.*

Of particular interest and as a foundation for further action in the EU are the recent Council conclusions on 'Human rights, participation and well-being of older persons in the era of digitalization', adopted on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020 under the German Presidency. The conclusions of the Trio Presidency (Germany, Portugal, Slovenia) in December 2020 give a follow-up to these general perspectives. The Trio Presidency calls for (point 10): "closing the digital divide between younger and older generations as well as between older women and men, namely by strengthening different forms of education and training, life-long learning opportunities and the development of skills". In these documents, and in almost all international documents on digitalization, the principle of 'digital inclusion for all' is included. Also, in the EU Digital Education Action Plan the need for digital literacy is sketched out and promoted, but the strategy and action plans are almost totally linked to formal teaching and education, with an important focus on improving individual competences and employability. A concrete analysis of an older person's problems to engage in digital learning and integration in the digital society is missing. And as a complement to this: no operational initiatives are available to open the doors for older persons to enter into the digital era in their own rhythm and with their own means.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://news.un.org/en/story/2018/12/1027991>; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933274795>

## ***Digital inclusion: the principles are there, operational actions are needed.***

Digital inclusion of older persons is not as simple as ‘having internet access’ or ‘solving the problem of missing digital skills’. Digital inclusion consists of several aspects: access to the internet, financial facilities, digital skills, insights into the digital organization of services and an ability to control information/ misinformation/ fake news. This means it is the result of a multi-fold process. It is obvious that we need more knowledge to better understand the obstacles and struggles of older persons with every-day digital interfaces. That would help to create better formal and informal educational practices for older persons to develop digital competences, get regular access to digital technology and actively participate in social, commercial and democratic practices. As participation in adult and life-long learning contexts seems to be deeply affected by earlier life-course experiences, careful consideration must be given to how to approach the problem of ‘non-participation in the digital learning processes’.

Acknowledging the particular challenges and also the many opportunities the digital age brings to senior citizens, the ESU calls on the EU, international organizations, governments and political leaders at all levels to:

- address older persons, respecting their unique life-history, highlighting their contribution to the silver economy, volunteering, innovative technologies and services for better life quality;
- welcome national and pan-European inclusive policies on active ageing and digitalization;
- support the promotion of intergenerational solidarity and fairness;
- enhance media and information literacy to help adult users, especially older generations, to understand and navigate autonomously across the digital media;
- promote the full participation in society by everybody including older persons through:
  - ensuring universal and unimpeded access to the internet and the diversity and searchability of its content;
  - providing digital literacy educational programs for all, including curricula adapted for older persons;
  - promoting policies for intergenerational solidarity and fairness;
  - supporting platforms for the transfer of experience and knowledge and for inter-generational mutual support;
  - using a variety of additional formats, such as radio broadcasts, printed notifications and direct services to assure access to essential information.

The ESU and its Member Associations will invite political leaders and all stakeholders to support this statement and to promote the knowledge of and opportunities for digital inclusion in communities at all levels. In particular, they insist on the use of funds and support mechanisms available for Recovery initiatives to ensure that all people should

obtain basic digital skills and to diminish the digital divides between generations, as well as those between rural areas and cities.

Massive expansion of technical infrastructure (broadband etc.) is not only relevant for older persons, but also for the development of rural areas, for decentralized production facilities, economic growth, new jobs and thus for future value-creation in the regions.

As an overall objective, solutions have to be developed for groups that are or will remain digitally impaired, for example due to dementia, in an inclusive process to all digitalization measures and means.

### ***Connect. Communicate. Contribute.***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, connectivity to the internet was more important than ever before. It is evident now, that access to the internet is as essential a public utility as electricity or water. The internet and digital technologies are windows to the world. Digital connectivity is the key to information, to learning, to telework, to shopping and entertainment as well as to communication with loved ones, the only way to celebrate, to commemorate, to get information on health and wellness services...

More than ever, it is obvious that digital connectivity and frequent use of the internet is needed not only in a professional context, but that 'all and everyone' is supposed to be able to use the internet and to be integrated in the digital arena. This is not yet the reality for considerably important groups of seniors.

Our societies have to cope with the obstacles that limit digital inclusiveness: lower digital skills, financial vulnerability and rural areas; governments at different levels, stakeholders, internet service providers, non-formal education services, seniors' associations, young people and seniors in mutual learning connections all have a role to play. Mastering digital technology has become a key component of what it means to participate fully in society. If we do not provide technology access and training to older persons, then the risks of social exclusion and loneliness will increase.

Older persons have the right to participate in all areas of society. Digital integration is a crucial condition for connectivity and to participate and contribute to society. The ESU and its Member Associations are ready to take their responsibility as active partners in civil society and in policy processes. Good practices will be shared and promoted in the network and an intensified communication with policymakers must guarantee multi-fold policy initiatives in order to realize inclusive digital societies for all.

The present statement, adopted by the ESU Executive Committee and its subsequent videoconference on 'The era of digitalization: from communication highways to disinformation and infodemic. Opportunities and potential risks' (see: [esu-epp.eu](http://esu-epp.eu)) on 23<sup>rd</sup>

March 2021, will be communicated by the ESU and its Member Associations to the EU Commission, the EU Council, the Council of Europe, governments at various levels, organizations and stakeholders involved with the integration of seniors in the digital era.

Brussels, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2021

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