

Breaking down barriers: Strategies to overcome the digital divide

CLEVER Cities in times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic created a rapid shift from in-person exchanges, meetings and communication – moving to the majority of interactions taking place online. With so many activities being digitalised, those without access to technology or the skills needed to use it are being left behind and out of discussions. This has particularly impacted older adults, who may be at higher risk of social isolation. However, the pandemic has also created opportunities for intergenerational technology use. Many younger family members have helped older adults learn how to use video conferencing tools to stay connected with loved ones.

Considerations of accessibility in terms of participation were critical during COVID-19 in the CLEVER Cities project, not least regarding the project's ambition to co-create nature-based solutions across the partner cities. Given this importance, this brief introduces the concept of a 'digital divide' and provides strategies for how to involve elderly and other vulnerable communities, on the basis of practical examples from the CLEVER Cities project.

What is the digital divide?

In 2001, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defined the term 'Digital Divide' as 'the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICT) and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities' (source: Bridging the digital divide in the EU).



Types of Digital Divide

Among the categories most threatened by digital exclusion are the elderly (so-called “inter-generational digital divide”), women who are not employed or in particular conditions (so-called “gender digital divide”), immigrants (so-called “digital linguistic cultural divide”), people with disabilities, people in prison and in general those who, having low levels of schooling and education, are unable to use IT tools.

Access to Internet in Europe

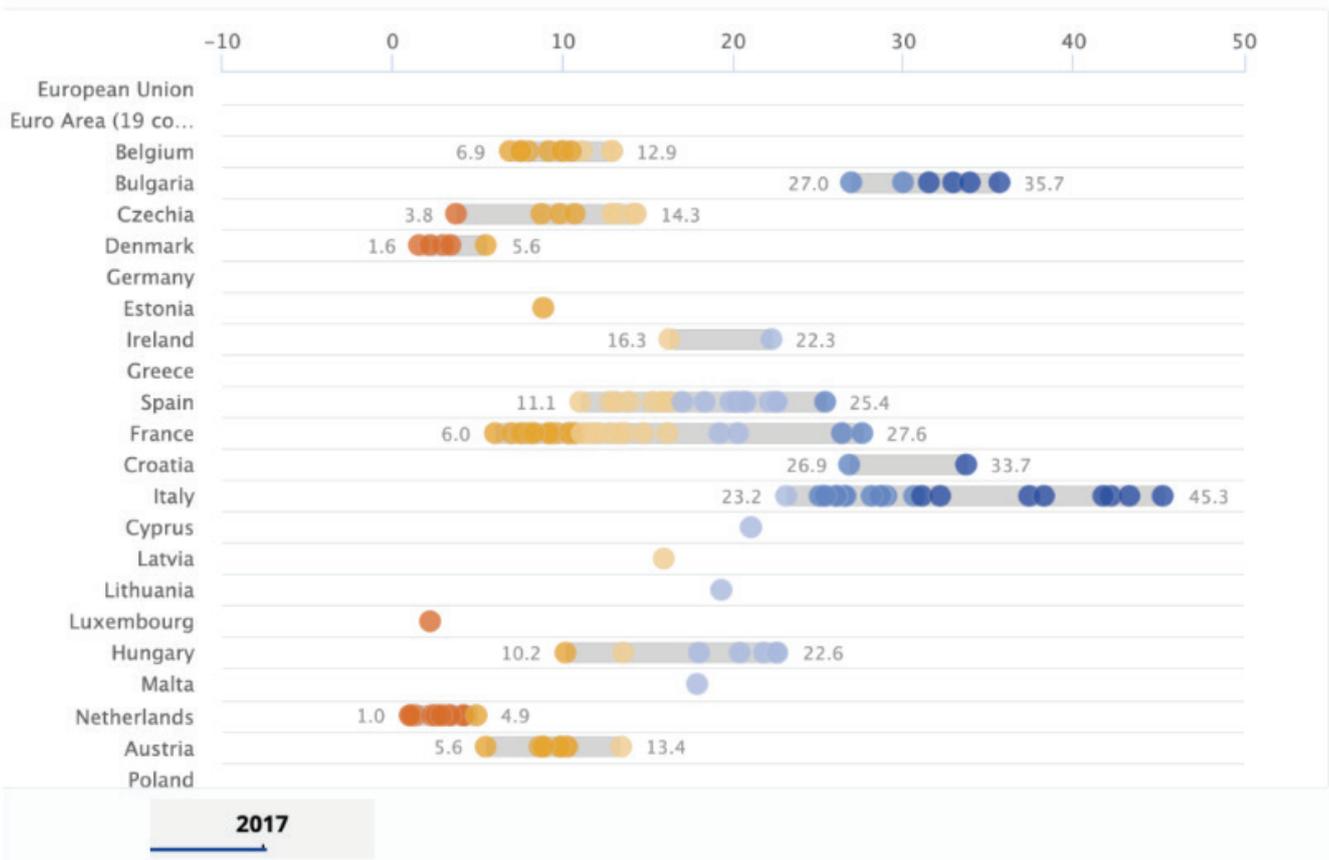
Eurostat data shows that approximately 17% of the population in the European Union has never used the internet. This statistic is concerning because the internet has become an essential tool for education, employment, and social inclusion.

The data also shows that there is a significant gap in internet usage between different age groups. For example, 98% of people aged 16-24 use the internet, while only 44% of people over 65 use the internet. This age-based gap in internet usage highlights the need for targeted initiatives to bridge the digital divide.

There are several challenges to accessing the internet in Europe, including economic, geographic, and social/cultural barriers. In the case of social and cultural barriers to internet access, some people may lack the necessary skills or knowledge to use the internet effectively. Others may have cultural or language barriers that prevent them from using the internet. These barriers can limit access to education, employment, and social inclusion.

Source: Agenda Digitale

③ People who never used a computer (% of people aged 16-74), 2017



How to involve the elderly and the vulnerable groups

Bridging the digital divide can have several benefits for the elderly and vulnerable targets. It can help to reduce social isolation and improve overall well-being. By staying connected with the community, with friends and family, they can feel more engaged with the world around them. Also, it can help to improve cognitive function by providing opportunities for learning and mental stimulation.



An intergenerational approach to technology use involves creating opportunities for people of different ages to learn from and interact with each other. Here are some tips for implementing an intergenerational approach to technology use:

1. Encourage older adults to learn from younger generations.

Many older adults may feel uncomfortable asking for help with technology. Encouraging them to seek assistance from younger family members or friends can help break down barriers.

2. Create opportunities for intergenerational learning.

Community centers, libraries, and other public spaces can offer classes or workshops that bring different generations together to learn about technology.

3. Emphasize the benefits of technology use.

Many older adults may not see the value in using technology. Highlighting its benefits, such as staying connected with family or accessing healthcare resources, can help motivate them to learn.



Finding the right tools

Finding the right tool might be tricky: it all depends on the target group you want to reach, the time available and the resources, both human and economic. By carefully considering these factors, you can choose a tool that maximizes reach, engagement, and the overall effectiveness of your communication efforts. Now, let's say you have a heterogeneous target group, consisting of individuals who are comfortable with the internet and others who are older and have difficulties using digital tools. It is necessary to identify a person who is capable of effectively supporting those who lack internet experience and create a sort of "learning moment" during activities, like completing an online questionnaire. The questionnaire should be developed with our target audience in mind, prioritizing a simple language and avoiding too many questions to ensure we don't lose the par-



ticipants' attention. In the case of an online questionnaire, it might be appropriate to use a dedicated website that is accessible even to people with disabilities.

Practical examples

To address the Digital Divide within the CLEVER Cities initiative, we have implemented strategies to provide support to co-design participants who faced barriers to online participation. In particular in Russoli, recognizing that not everyone of the residents had access to internet connectivity or technological devices, we established offline and local-based support systems. This ensured that all the residents of the towers who were interested in the initiative could still actively participate and contribute by completing online questionnaires, supported by a CLEVER partner: our team assists these people in person, guiding them through the questionnaire process and ensuring that their input was captured and included in the co-design process and decision-making.

Additionally, we implemented targeted local offline communication efforts to bridge the digital gap. These initiatives involved organizing in-person events and gatherings in local communities, following the guidelines and restrictions of the

Covid-19 health emergency. These local events provide an opportunity for individuals without internet access or technological proficiency to engage directly with the CC initiative.

