

Connectivity and discontinuity in social work practice: Challenges and opportunities of the implementation of an e-social work system in Romania

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Abstract

To increase the efficiency of the social work system in Romania, “investments in improving the current IT system in order to build an efficient electronic social work system” (Romanian Government, 2015b, 85) and the “development of a modern payment system” (Romanian Government, 2015b, 85) are key-points in the National Strategy concerning Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for the period 2015-2020. Among other utilisations, the e-social work system is meant to be used by potential clients when submitting a request to benefit of means-tested measures. The current level of digitalisation of the Romanian society, particularly among vulnerable groups, leaves room for constructive debate regarding the feasibility and the potential challenges of such a project. The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges posed to social workers’ daily practice by the introduction of digitalisation in the work place, as well as its potential effects on the social worker-client professional relationship. We discuss based on the national strategies and data provided by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI)⁶(connectivity infrastructure and quality, digital skills of human capital, use of internet by citizens, integration and digital technology, and digital public services). We identify gaps between the aims and the proposed solutions concerning the e-social work system. Our study contributes to understanding the potential changes in social workers’ traditional roles brought forth by the implementation of a digitized social work system.

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⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/scoreboard/romania>

Keywords

Digitization of social work, social worker - client relationship, social work practice

Background

In September 1972, the US journal *Social Work* published an article by Paul Abels who debated whether or not computers can do social work. While outlining the advantages to it, such as being more objective and less biased or addressing the needs of more clients at the same time, whilst giving each of them the needed time and attention (Abels, 1972, p. 9), the author also considered potential obstacles, such as beneficiaries' reluctance to receiving social work services from a computer or challenges in ensuring the confidentiality of the personal data provided by beneficiaries. Envisioning the future, social workers are encouraged to consider how computers might improve social work practice. Almost half a century later, taking into consideration the vast technological progress, the answer to the question "Can computers do social work?" may most probably be answered affirmatively, given the technological development of both hardware and software. Scholars and social work practitioners around the world continue to debate questions such as (a) how ethical would it be, (b) to what degree would confidentiality actually be ensured or (c) how will the quality of social services be monitored and evaluated (Chan & Holosko, 2016; Dombo, Kays, & Weller, 2014; Reamer, 2013, 2015). In this paper, we focus on analysing the challenges posed by the digitalisation of social work in Romania, considering the possibilities (a) for developing an integrated electronic platform to be accessed by social workers employed within the public system, at different levels (local, county, regional or national) and (b) for determining potential beneficiaries of (non)monetary benefits to independently access the provided hardware and software infrastructure for submitting their requests to public institutions.

Within the framework of the current paper, digital division is understood as the gap between different groups in accessing new technologies and their benefits. It is expected to identify these differences based on socio-economic status, area of residence or even age. These differences are not only observable in in-country settings, but comparative analysis may also be conducted between countries (Tufă, 2010). As access to computers enhances, the discussion concerning digital divide moves towards digital literacy and skills needed in order to avoid social exclusion (Cohron, 2015; Eynon and Geniets, 2016).

Social work, although a human oriented profession, cannot overlook the challenges as well as the opportunities of information and communication technologies (ICTs) usage both for professionals and their beneficiaries. In this context, the breadth and impact of digital exclusion need to be analysed and assessed in order to best address the potential risks of increasing inequalities and to enhance social inclusion, as features to what is nowadays referred to as revolution in the digital society (Schwab, 2016). Steyaert and Gould (2009, p. 751) argue that "digital exclusion cannot be separated from more general social exclusion patterns, as both reinforce each other" and thus the role of social

workers is to offer equal chances to all individuals in order to benefit of the opportunities brought about by the internet. Social workers may address this issue by mediating between support for enhancing the digital skills of (long-time) unemployed persons and their access to the labour market. In order to stimulate the usage of computers at home, the aforementioned authors propose a couple of solutions: to provide computers to low-income households, though programmes directly addressing school-aged children, and to increase the use of recycled and refurbished computers, which could be implemented by setting-up vocational training for those willing to engage in continuous learning programmes.

Recognizing the implications of technology to social work practice, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) have developed in 2005 the Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice in order to guide professionals' activity addressing ethical conduct and protection of the beneficiaries when using technology.

Considering that (1) Romania ranks last among EU28 countries on digital skills (European Commission, 2016d), (2) "the majority of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion live in rural areas" (Teșliuc, Grigoraș, & Stănculescu, 2015, p. 314), where about 50% of households have a computer (National Institute of Statistics, 2015, p. 1), (3) only around half of those active on the job market have digital skills (European Commission, 2016d), (4) between 2010 and 2015 around 3% of the population, on average, used the internet for submitting forms to public authorities (European Commission, 2016e), Romanian social workers might have a potential important role to play in reducing poverty within national borders through the use of the ICT system and in reducing the digital divide.

In the article, following a brief literature review, the Romanian context is described. The framework provided by the analysis of national strategies, allows the authors to envision the strengths, weaknesses and potential challenges of digitalisation of the social work system in Romania, before reaching the conclusions.

Research question

In order to describe the local context and answer the question of whether or not the Romanian social work system is ready for digitalisation, we analysed the national strategies concerning social inclusion and poverty reduction (Romanian Government, 2015b) and the one concerning the digital agenda for Romania (Romanian Government, 2015a), the targets for 2020 and the key foreseen activities, identifying key interventions considering the development of the e-Social work system (e-Social Inclusion). By using the indicators analysed in the scientific literature, we use data from the Digital Economy and Social Index, Eurostat and from the National Institute of Statistics to describe the Romanian context and briefly address some of the challenges social workers might face when the strategies are implemented.

Conceptual framework

When describing the digital divide, Paul Gorski (2003) addresses a level beyond physical access to computers and internet, arguing that despite achieved targets like equal access for men and women, the digital divide can still be observed if content and ways of using technologies are analysed. The aforementioned author considers that digital inequalities are mirrored by inequalities in society and states that, in order to reduce them, society is to find a way of eliminating institutionalised privileges. For instance, he argues that the groups which are excluded from obtaining benefits out of the use of technologies are the same ones who benefit less from education, legal, political and economic systems (Gorski, 2003, p. 148). The dimensions he identifies are racism, sexism, classism, linguisticism and ableism. Considering the characteristics of these dimensions, the author argues that tackling digital divide only by increasing physical access to computers and internet does not suffice and new schemes should be identified (Gorski, 2003, p. 149). In other words, in the USA, if racism is not considered when enhancing opportunities in accessing computers and internet, there will still be schools in which Afro-American children have less access than white children and, if not constantly supported and encouraged, they might not identify for themselves the advantages of building careers in technology.

For Romania, we couldn't identify any data concerning children's access to computers and internet in schools based on their ethnicity. Thus, it can only be assumed that the percentage of schools frequented mostly by Roma children where access to computers and internet is provided is lower than the percentage of schools frequented mostly by Romanian children (Stoica and Wamsiedel, 2012); Roma is an ethnical minority in Romania. Data to differentiate between different ethnic groups' access to computer and internet, level of digital skills and the use of internet may contribute to building sound social policies in Romania which may also target the inclusion of Roma on the labour market. When considering ableism, P. Gorski (2003) makes reference to a report drafted by Humphrey Taylor (2000) which shows that the lives of people with disabilities have improved through the use of internet, as it allows them to be more connected to the world. However, depending on the disability, there is still room to improve the content and ways to present it online, in order to make it more accessible for all. An analysis on a study conducted in North Carolina shows that the effects of gender and residency in rural areas on use of technologies are primarily influenced by income and education (Wilson, Wallin, & Reiser, 2003, p. 140).

Christian Fuchs (2009, p. 41) is testing to identify the role social inequality plays in digital divide. The author criticizes the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen because it moves the focus from poverty, as related to monetary situation of an individual/household, to the access to different social goods (health care, education, etc.), with the consequence of diminishing the importance of the inequalities in the income distribution (Fuchs, 2009, p. 43). The author argues that social inequalities determine the shape of digital division. He analyses data from different countries to identify the predictors which most influence the access to internet. He concluded that the

factor with most influence is the economic development of the country, followed by level of urbanisation, level of equality and level of democracy. His study shows that, for the data concerning internet users available for the year 2005, if inequality would increase by 30%, the number of internet users would decrease by 20% (Fuchs, 2009, p. 54). Thus, the author argues that equality in distribution of the economic output of a country and the level of economic achievement highly influence the access to ICT systems. For achieving universal access to internet, the author suggests that models of public access to ICT and common interest policy measures play an important role in reducing the digital divide.

P. Gorski (2003, p. 161) identifies three gaps within the digital divide: physical access, teaching experiences in which technology is used in a sound manner, gaps in accessing relevant content on the internet, while C. Fuchs (2009, p. 46) considers that the digital divide comprises four gaps: (a) inequalities in physically accessing information and communication technologies (ICT) (b) inequalities in learning the skills to operate ICT and (c) inequalities in access to economic advantages derived by using ICT and (d) unequal participation in institutions governing ICTs and society.

In their analysis of the literature on digital divide, Sinikka Sassi (2005) identified four approaches: the technocratic approach, the social structure approach, information structure and exclusion approach and the modernisation and capitalism approach. The technocratic approach reunites the opinion that social inequalities may be tackled through the use of new technologies. In order to achieve this goal, it is proposed to enhance access, increase competences and improve content. No consensus is reached on who should cover the costs, but there is an agreement that governments and/or the public systems play an important role in promoting strategies which lead to reducing the gaps. The social structure approach deals with analysing the purposes for which computers and the internet are used and it considers that new technologies have the potential to lead to social changes. Despite the fact that ICT lead to more empowered people, there are differences in the way technologies are used and which content is accessed. Therefore, some authors like Pippa Norris (2000 *apud* Sassi, 2005, p. 690) argue that increasing accessibility to internet and computers does not lead to reaching social justice for all. The information structure and exclusion approach includes analysis dealing with the social and geographical distribution of new technologies. It argues that there is an association between exclusion and information and communication technologies and that, based on the fact that the systems are more widespread, inequality increases (Lash, S. 1994 *apud* Sassi, 2005, p. 691). The modernisation and capitalism approach is a continuation of the latter, as it distinguishes between the global and local levels, between time and space, while highlighting labour market challenges in the context of the increased influence of using computer and the internet. In this perspective, the authors outline the increased differences between the rich and the poor, while Zygmunt Bauman (1998 *apud* Sassi, 2005, p. 693) discriminates between busy elites, for whom the ICT has cancelled distances and thus live in time, and poor individuals who are tied to space and have less responsibilities and activities in order to fill in their time. Sassi considers that ICT has not yet the means to produce social and political activities, “but it does facilitate their organization, mobilization and expression” (Sassi, 2005, p. 698).

Given the theoretical framework exposed, our endeavour fits best in the modernisation and capitalism approach, as we are focusing on identifying potential challenges faced by social workers employed within public system when standardisation and digitalisation of the current practices are set in place. In order to do so, starting from the main gaps identified in the literature, we continue by describing the Romanian context concerning access and use of computers and internet. After briefly describing national strategies concerning the topic of creating an e-Social work system and considering the current situation of accessibility and skills, we finalise by emphasising potential obstacles in the implementation of an integrated digital platform available for social workers active in public institutions.

Romanian context concerning digitalisation

The Digital Economy and Social Index (DESI) is comprised of five components. *Connectivity* is measured through (a) fixed *broadband*, which is twofold measured by coverage (accessibility to connect) and take-up (actual users), (b) *mobile broadband*, which is also twofold measured by take-up and spectrum (availability of necessary radio frequencies to permit connectivity), (c) *speed*, measured by coverage (possibility to connect to high speed internet) and subscriptions (how many users there actually are), (d) *affordability*, which is measured by the price indicator for the fixed broadbands. The latter is represented as the “minimum price that a potential user would have to pay in order to obtain a basic fixed broadband connection (allowing at least 12 Mbps) as a percentage of her gross income” (European Commission, 2016a). On Connectivity, Romania ranks 23 in the European Union, below the European Union’s average (European Commission, 2016a).

Human Capital (European Commission, 2016f) has two dimensions: (a) *basic skills and usage*, measured by how many internet users there are and by how many people from the total population possess basic digital skills; and (b) *advanced skills and development*, measured by the percentage of total number of specialists in the information and communication technologies and the share of those in total population graduating in Mathematics, Engineering, Technology and Sciences. On these dimensions, in the European Union, Romania ranks second to last, in 2016 (European Commission, 2016b).

In 2016, according to data from the European Commission website, Romania ranks also second to last for *Internet Use* (European Commission, 2016h). This indicator consists of three components, the first of which is (a) *content*, measured by the percentage of those accessing the internet via broadband connections for reading online news, listening to music, watching videos and games online and for subscribing to accessing video on demand. The (b) *communication* component is measured by the percentages of those who access online video or audio calls via broadband and by the percentage of those who use social networks. The percentage of those using e-banking and of those shopping online is contributing for calculating the (c) *transaction* dimension. Romanians mostly engage in different social activities, like communication through voice and video calls,

read news online, play games and access social networks (78%, compared with 63% EU average for engaging in social networks). However, Romanians rank lowest in using internet banking (10% compared with 57% EU average) (European Commission, 2016b).

In the European Union, Romania ranks last in *Integration of Digital Technology* (European Commission, 2016g), which is measured through (a) business digitalisation and (b) eCommerce. The first, *business digitalisation* has five components: (a1) within companies, which is the status of electronically sharing documents and it is measured by calculating an Electronic Information Sharing Digital Economy and Society Index, (a2) use of the technology for Radio Frequency Identification, (a3) engagement in business on social networks, (a4) usage of online invoices and (a5) Cloud services. The latter is measured by three components: (b1) share of the small and medium size companies which have sold products online in the last year, (b2) the average turnover realised by previously mentioned companies from online sales and (b3) the percentages of them which have made sales online in other European Union countries.

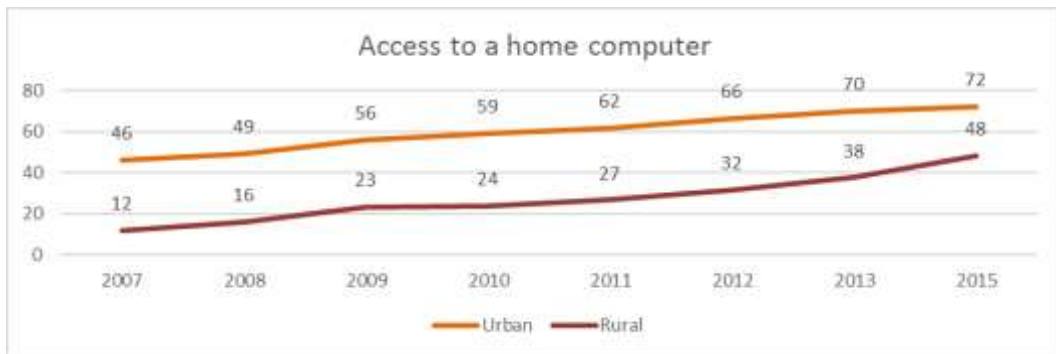
In the last dimension, Romania ranks second to last. This component addressed Digital public services and it is measured by *eGovernment* services, comprising (a1) data for the share of online users who communicate and share documents with the local administration, (a2) level of data existing on pre-filled forms online, (a3) share of possibilities of addressing tasks dealing with the public administration completely online, and (a4) the administration's commitment for providing availability of open data sources online (European Commission, 2016c).

Romania ranks 28th out of the 28 European Union countries on DESI in 2016 (European Commission, 2016b), but due to fast developments in the areas analysed by the index in the last nine years since its accession to the European Union, it is part of the countries which are catching up the differences, together with Cyprus, Croatia, Slovenia, Latvia and Italy. According to the country profile, the slow development of the digital economy is determined by low levels of digital skills and trust. Despite the fact that the country ranks best in connectivity, it is recommended to achieve two goals: an increase in the coverage of fixed broadband networks (the percentage at the moment is 89% households compared with 97% EU's average) and in the number of households which subscribe to fixed broadband (60% households, while EU average is 72%). The country ranks best in coverage of high-speed Internet access (72% households, while EU average is 71%). However, the percentage of the subscription fee from the gross income for an individual is higher than the European average (2.7% from the gross income in Romania compared with 1.3% in European Union), which may contribute to discouraging citizens to acquire fixed broadband internet connection.

In Romania, 52% of the population used the internet in 2014. For the same year, the average in the EU is 76%. A third of Romanians had never used internet. 26% of the population in 2015 had digital skills, while in EU the percentage of the population is 55%. From the total employed individuals, in Romania 2.6% are ICT specialists. For 2013, the number of graduates from Science, Technology and Mathematics in 1000 individuals was 17, which does not cover for the deficit in digital skills (European Commission, 2016b).

According to Eurostat data, in Romania, the percentage of internet users who access it at least once a week has increased more than 2.5 times since 2006. In 2015 little more than half of the total population declared to be using Internet at least once a week. In regards to the area of residence, 70% of the households from urban areas use computers, while in rural areas only 38% use computers (Andrei, 2016, p. 83). According to the National Institute of Statistics (2016, TIC101D), out of the total number of residents in rural Romania, 48% have direct access to a computer in the household. The share of households with computers in the urban area is 72% of total households located in this area.

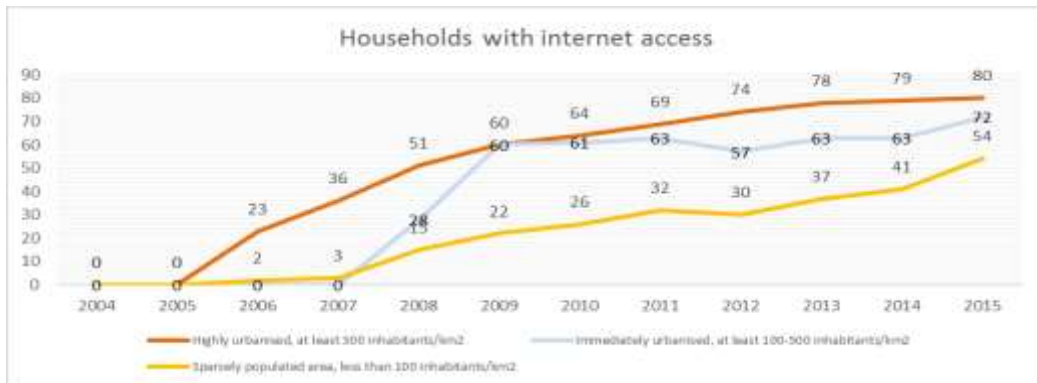
Graph 1: Households with computers, on residency



Source: The graph is created by the authors, using data from the Tempo INS Database, (Social Statistics/Living standards/14.Population's access to ICT/ TIC101D Share of households with computer at home, on residency, in the total of households in each residency category) accessed on November 2016.

In Romania, since 2007, a high increase in take-up internet subscription at households' level is observed. In areas with low density (less than 100 inhabitants/km²), 54% of the households have internet connection. The take-up rate for households in intensely urbanised areas (more than 500 inhabitants/km²) is 80%. According to Eurostat, in 2015 in Romania, 68% of the total households had internet access, while in the Tempo Database of the NIS (TIC102A) only 61% of all households have internet access.

Graph 2: Households with internet access, on density



Source: The graph is created by the authors, using data from Eurostat, *Households – level of internet access isoc_ci_in_h*, accessed in November 2016.

In the literature, the existence of children in a household is positively associated with internet access (Fuchs, 2009, p. 48). For 2015, according to data on Eurostat, 80% of households with dependent children have internet access in Romania, while only 63% of households without dependent children are connected to the internet. For the same year, the share of households with income in first quartile which have internet access is 27%, while the European Union average for the same category is 62%. 92% of the households with income in the fourth quartile are connected (97% is the average at EU28), underlining that income is an important factor of computer and internet use (Eurostat, 2016a).

According to data from the Tempo Databases of the National Institute of Statistics (2016, TIC102A), the households run by students, employers and employees record the highest percentages concerning households with internet access, in the total of their category. Out of all the student-run households, 96% have internet access. 91% of the total households run by employers and 89% of the total households run by employees are households with internet access. Other sources (Andrei, 2016, p. 84) present similar figures: 93% of the households headed by an employer and 84% of those headed by an employee have access to internet. Only 47% of the households headed by inactive persons have access to internet and 55% of those headed by unemployed persons, confirming that income has an influence on access to internet. Although visible progress is registered since 2007, in 2015 only 52% of the households run by unemployed persons were connected to the internet and 54% of households run by other inactive persons. Less than half of the households led by pensioners are connected to the internet (37% of all households led by pensioners) and half of the households led by self-employed are connected, underlining thus existing differences determined by occupation, which may be influenced by age, education, gender, which, in turn, has an influence on income (National Institute of Statistics, 2016, TIC102A).

Similar percentages are presented when analysing households with computers (National Institute of Statistics, 2016, TIC101A). As well as at the international level, the percentages of pensioners using internet has increased over the last years, however, it is still below half of all pensioners led households in Romania. Studying internet and computer use among older users, Janet Chang, Carolyn McAllister and Rosemary McCaslin (2015, p. 77) identify associations between age, education, ethnicity, using a computer at work and owning a computer and internet use.

Regarding the last dimension of DESI, in Romania, the share of those who have used e-government services in the last 12 months to interact with the public authorities has varied since 2009 until 2015 at the level of the entire population. Interestingly, in 2012 there was a peak, with 31% of the population using the internet to interact with public authorities. However, within the same time frame, not more than 5% of Romanians have used internet in the last 12 months to fill in forms (data for 2015 from Eurostat). When analysing data for only active persons, 25 to 54 years old, one may observe small differences in internet usage to interact with public authorities within categories based on the level of education. A small increase in 2015 is observed for those with low and medium levels of formal education, but is not reaching the level of 2012. On all three groups (low level, medium level and high level of education) there is an increase in 2012,

followed by a decrease in 2013 of using the internet for interacting with public authorities. It is to be investigated if the difference is caused by changes in the methodology to measure this indicator, or if other events determined the quick rise in 2012. Among those with medium level of education is observed that after the peak in 2012 and the sudden drop in 2013, the values for 2014 and 2015 are with 3-4 percentage points higher than those registered before 2012 (Eurostat, 2016b).

Table 1 Internet use: interaction with public authorities (last 12 months) in Romania

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Individuals aged 25-54 low formal education	0	1	1	10	1	1	2
Individuals aged 25-54 medium formal education	6	6	6	35	4	9	10
Individuals aged 25-54 high formal education	38	44	39	70	22	42	41

Source: Table created by the authors, using data available on Eurostat, isoc_ciegi_ac

The pattern is not noticeable when analysing data for the same categories of individuals who used internet to submit filled-in forms online. Small variations are observed for each category, but in 2012 and 2013 a drop in using internet for submitting online forms is observed. From those with high level of education, in 2015 only about 25% have submitted online forms in the attention of the public authorities, less than in 2010.

National strategies targeting 2020

Starting with 2012, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly implemented the Social Assistance System Modernization Project¹ developed through a loan agreement between the Government of Romania and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD or World Bank). The project's aim is to improve the overall performance of Romania's social assistance system by strengthening performance management, improving equity, improving administrative efficiency and reducing error and fraud. The closing date was extended to December 31, 2017, and a recent evaluation from the World Bank experts rated the project as "moderately unsatisfactory both for development objectives and implementation" (World Bank, 2016). In terms of the IT systems for social assistance improvement, important steps were done by implementation of SAFIR (Integrated Information System for Administration of Social Benefits) and the Electronic Central Registry of Disabled Persons (operational since June 2014), thus integrating information once registered by different management information systems. SAFIR records data related to Child Raising Benefit, Guaranteed Minimum Income, Family Allowance and State Child Allowance. Through SAFIR usage, the administrative activity of National Agency for Social Benefits and Social Inspection, as guardian of the integrity of all cash benefits, improved considerably consequently reducing error and fraud, permitting also the data crosscheck with other databases. The Electronic Central Registry of Disabled Persons is monthly updated by Social Work and

Child Protection Directorates at county level and Bucharest municipality; it is constantly used to easily create standard reports (Manualul Operațional al Proiectului privind Modernizarea Sistemului de Asistență Socială în România/Project Operations Manual on Social Assistance System Modernization in Romania, 2012ⁱⁱ).

The implementation of an e-governance system in Romania is strongly encouraged by the European Union through the digital agenda. The European Union's Digital Agenda aims at a unique digital market, which is operational, trusted, secured, easy accessible; it enhances opportunities for the IT research and innovation sectors and contributes to increasing digital skills, knowledge and inclusion for the benefit of all; it focuses on reducing traditional energy consumption levels and on quality social services provisions for all European citizens in health and social protection. Romania has integrated these goals in the National Strategy concerning the Digital Agenda for Romania (Romanian Government, 2015a). According to this document, Romania aims to increase several indicators like (high-speed) broadband coverage and take-up (users who connect), shopping online and transnationally, enhance online selling for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The goal is to increase the share of weekly internet users (a) from 48% in 2014 to 60% in 2020 of the total population and (b) among vulnerable groups from 28% in 2014 to 45% in 2020. Another goal is to increase the use of e-governance tools by increasing from 10% in 2014 to 35% in 2020 and from 3% in 2014 to 20% in 2020 the share of individuals in Romania who return filled-in forms. The share of population who has never used the internet should decrease by 9 percentage points from 39% in 2014 to 30% in 2020 (Romanian Government, 2015a, p. 9). When the targets set for EU average are compared with Romania, it is observed that in 2020, giving that all outputs are met, the gap between Romania and the EU28 average will not be eliminated. The efforts and investments of Romania should therefore exponentially increase in order to rank higher among European Union's 28 member states.

The four fields of action proposed by the National Strategy concerning the Digital Agenda contribute to reducing the digital divide: improved operability of the e-Governance system, ICT in education, health and social protection, eCommerce and investments, research and development in ICT and improved infrastructure for Digital Services. These actions contribute to reducing at least three of the gaps – as identified by C. Fuchs (2009) and P. Gorski (2003) and described above - between Romania and other European Union's member states: increased physical accessibility to computers, internet, accessible content and opportunities to economically benefit from ICT. However, these action fields do not mention any specific measures to reduce the gaps between citizens within Romania. Even though Romania targets to increase the share of individuals in difficulties which use the internet weekly by 17 percentage points, 55% of individuals in difficulties will remain without access to the internet on a weekly basis; also 30% of the population would still have never used the internet in 2020, meaning that 30% of Romanians are not benefitting from the economic opportunities provided by the use of ICT systems. More data is needed to identify the percentages of individuals in difficulties who have never accessed internet.

The variables which influence the abilities to access ICT resources are mentioned in the National Strategy concerning the Digital Agenda for Romania (Romanian Government, 2015a, p. 75): (a) differences in the communities' income, (b) rural-urban and regional differences in relative poverty and (c) physical and mental disabilities and the social exclusion. These are to support the intervention in e-Inclusion. Though for other fields there are SWOT analysis conducted, no information is presented for the investment in e-Inclusion. Considering that e-Inclusion targets Romanian citizens which are confronting various difficulties (lack or small income, lack or low level of education, health or housing problems etc.) in order to really achieve the reduction of gaps in digitalisation, the context should also be described and analysed, for underlining the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of an e-Inclusion system, as seen from a governmental perspective.

One of the objectives of the European Union's Strategy for 2020 is to reduce at least by 20 million the number of people in risk and/or living in poverty or social inclusion (European Commission, 2015b). As part of the European Union, Romania will contribute to attaining the target by supporting 580,000 people to be outside of the risk of poverty or social exclusion (European Commission, 2015a). In order to achieve this result, in May 2015 the National Strategy concerning social inclusion and poverty reduction (henceforth Strategy) was adopted through the government decision No.383/2015. Overall, the strategy's objective is to increase social inclusion by ensuring equal opportunities of residents, fulfilling basic needs, increase respect for diversity and uniqueness and ensure dignified living (Romanian Government, 2015b, p. 5). Treating sustainable development as a transversal theme, the Strategy is focusing on reducing income poverty by increasing the occupation rate and improving the social transfers of different benefits in order to reduce discrepancies of circumstances which may determine unequal opportunities and favour some, more than others, to live in risk of poverty or social exclusion. One of the merits of the strategies is that, based on the data used to describe the national context, it proposes key recommendations in order to reach its goals, in areas such as: employment, social transfers, social services, education, health, housing, social participation, regional policy and increasing institutional capacity.

The digitalisation of the field of social work is comprised within the main domain of increasing the institutional capacity to reduce social exclusion and poverty. Two are the proposed measures foreseen: (a) to identify solutions for the management of the relations with the beneficiaries, so that the standardised social work practices at local level may be connected to (b) the new information management system in social work, envisioned for automatization purposes (Romanian Government, 2015b, p. 14), which would constitute the e-social work platform. In the same set of measures, it is proposed to improve the institutional capacity in monitoring and evaluation by improving data collection capacity of administrative data, improving skills of data analysis and developing a national monitoring and evaluation system of the social inclusion progress. The creation of an efficient e-social work system, which would comprise all social services, benefits and programmes and integrate information from different databases, was one of the key interventions for the period 2015-2017 (Romanian Government, 2015b, p. 85). In order to

achieve this, “strong investments” in IT personnel, IT management, project management and IT organisation are foreseen. Although IT expertise is regarded as requiring massive investment, potential sources for covering such costs are not clearly mentioned.

There is also a lack of direct references to the current status of IT infrastructure to support such a platform and to programmes aimed at identifying and/or increasing (if needed) the level of basic computer usage skills among those in risk of poverty or social exclusion. It is mentioned that the local authorities’ burden to administrate paper work will be reduced, as the beneficiaries may instead access web portals to submit their requests (Romanian Government, 2015b, p. 80). Even though not clearly mentioning which instruments will the beneficiaries use to access the web portal or which will be the skills needed for a successful process, it is however stated that the information and communication technologies in most local authorities are rather lacking (Romanian Government, 2015b, p 80). The vulnerable groups identified in this strategies are the following: the poor, children and young people deprived of care and parental support, elderly people living alone or being dependent, Roma, people living with disability, people living in marginalised groups and other vulnerable groups (people living with addictions, those deprived of liberty of living under judiciary control, people supervised by the probation system, homeless, domestic violence victims, human trafficking victims, refugees and immigrants).

According to the Action Plan of the Strategy, in which specific objectives, foreseen actions, deadlines and responsible institutions are presented, the e-social work platform is meant to exchange rapid information with the electronic data base of the public finance, electronic agricultural registry, electronic occupation and pensions registry, electronic civil status registry and electronic social services national providers’ registry (Romanian Government, 2015c, p. 22). The actions planned for achieving the improvement of service providing activities through consolidating information technology are divided in three stages. For the first one, the actions to be implemented for the period 2015-2017 are: (a) to develop IT support for the new Minimum income for insertion, (b) to move data base from previously used software to a new one, (c) to provide support to the local authorities for information and communication technologies, (d) to reform the social-work system, especially at central level. In the second stage, from 2016-2017, it is desired (a) to develop a new social work operating model and (b) to initiate the modernisation of the payment system. The activities foreseen for the last stage (2018-2020), are (a) to develop and implement the Minimum Income of Insertion and (b) to finalise the modernisation of the payment system (Romanian Government, 2015c, p. 69). Overall, ensuring physical access to technologies, increasing the level of digital skills and the development of accessible content for vulnerable groups is one priority action to contribute to connecting the targeted population to the market and encouraging social innovation. To improve the access to information and communication technologies and increase the level of digital skills is foreseen to contribute to the quality of life improvement especially in rural areas (Romanian Government, 2015c, p. 60).

One of the limits of the strategy is that it makes no direct recommendations for reducing the digital divide. With this purpose in mind, the strategy might have provided

the set-up for initiatives concerning gathering data (at least) on physical accessibility to information and communication technologies and their quality and the level of digital skills and capacities, informing on potential gaps between regions, communities, households and individuals.

Some of the advantages of an e-Social work public system may be:

- Standardised procedures, which may reduce time invested in administrative tasks, reduce error rate, increase trust of beneficiaries in social work procedures;
- It would contribute to reducing discrepancies between rural and urban areas practices as well as between counties, for the same type of services;
- Inception training would be oriented towards procedures, which may contribute to making the new social workers more comfortable in adjusting to the requirements of the job.

Some of the disadvantages of an e-Social work public system may be:

- Rigid rules and less flexibility for social worker to provide case oriented services;
- Increase the gaps between social worker, as the expert, and the beneficiaries;
- Dependent of the digital skills of the social workers.

Potential challenges:

- Infrastructure related:
 - Increased investments in improving accessibility to computers and internet for both public institutions and residents in remote areas;
 - Increased investments in developing integrated software programmes to comply with the practice of social work and be in accordance with national regulations;
- Investment in increasing the digital skills and literacy of social workers, beneficiaries and other stakeholders;
 - Increased investment in maintenance of the hardware and software infrastructure and ensuring on-going technical support;
- Social work profession related:
 - Investment in developing working procedures which are in compliance with the social work practice;
 - Investments in training social workers and public workers with responsibilities in social work to correctly use the software developed;
- Beneficiaries related:
 - Investments in increasing the digital skills and literacy of individuals living in difficulties;
 - Enhancing access to computers and internet;
 - Encourage provision of correct information to public social work system by using technologies and internet;
 - Developing open professional relations with beneficiaries.

Conclusions

Access to computers and internet varies across different social groups. Digital skills are improving, but for the moment, they are rather low. Romanians' use of computer and internet to address public authorities is medium for adults with higher formal education level, while for those with low or medium formal education level the share it is rather low. A quarter of those with high formal education send filled-in forms to public authorities. Despite developments in the e-Governance system, which entitles efforts from the public institutions to enhance online communication, for example through on-going website updates or by creating chat platforms or accepting filled-in forms online or scanned document (and not requesting the signed original), there is still to be addressed if the population has access to a computer, sound internet connection, assuming that all are both able to understand the content and willing to engage in online activities. Therefore, integrated solutions are to be envisioned, such as campaigns for promoting computer and internet use, trainings for enhancing basic digital skills and literacy or stimulating the availability of infrastructure of connecting in remote areas. Otherwise, digitalisation of the social work system is prone to create inequalities in accessing social rights.

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ⁱ Law no. 68/2012 to ratify the Loan Agreement (the Project on Social Assistance System Modernization) between Romania and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, signed in Bucharest on July 8, 2011

ⁱⁱ Project Operations Manual on Social Assistance System Modernization in Romania, 2012, adopted through Law no. 68/2012, <http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/Familie/SASMP/MO-SASMP.pdf>