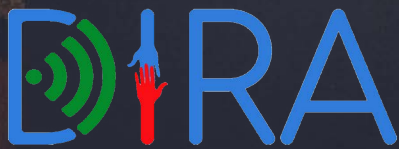# Digital inclusion for Roma adults: gaining knowledge and skills in e-services

Policy recommendation paper 2024

Introduction

The project Digital Inclusion for Roma Adults: Gaining Knowledge and Skills in e-Services (DIRA) aims to contribute to building inclusive societies in which Roma adults enjoy equal rights and access to services and information [1].

Five international partners are involved in the DIRA project: Romni-APS (Italy), Udruženje gradjana Djurdjevdan (Serbia), Faculty of Information and Communication Technologies (North Macedonia), Sumnal (North Macedonia), and Deaconess Foundation (Finland). Funded by the Erasmus+ program under Key Action 2, the program offers different countries opportunities to advance their knowledge in improving the socio-economic status of Roma adults via non-formal education.

Project activities

- Baseline survey: Digital skills in the Roma community
- Developing the DIRA learning platform and training material
- Training of trainers and training the Roma on using the learning platform and e-services
- Networking, information dissemination, and policy recommendations

It is expected that the project's policy recommendations will endorse policy changes in various forms of governance (local, regional, national, or international) in an attempt to give Roma adults the opportunity to access education, which will increase their opportunities for socio-economic inclusion in society.

DIRA project policy recommendations

Increased efforts are crucial to achieve Roma inclusion

The baseline study, implemented in the project partner countries by the consortium, showed that Roma adults hardly use the available IT tools for e-services provided by public and private institutions [2].

A large part of the adult population and the socially excluded are not familiar with the new technologies that are currently used for service provision and civic and political participation. For those who do not interact with these technologies on a daily basis, it is difficult to keep up with the rapid development of the IT sector, especially when it comes to using applications and online forms. Every update in e-services requires new skills, creating gaps for their successful usage by socially excluded people. Problems and gaps deepen over time, and this situation can be decisive for people's inclusion in the system.

Therefore, the DIRA project policy recommendations emphasize the importance of user research, usability testing, and gathering feedback from target users to understand their needs, challenges, and preferences through surveys, interviews, etc.

Increasing access to free courses for Internet and data security and digital devices

The Deaconess Foundation and its partner organizations have uncovered high levels of digital exclusion among Roma youths in Finland, Serbia, Macedonia, and Italy [3]. Many Roma are still unable to use the Internet in ways that allow them to participate fully in the economic, social, and political life of modern society. The fact that access to digital opportunities is limited to the use of a smartphone (the use of desktop computers, laptops or tablets is rather limited) constitutes a major obstacle to the use of digital services. Smartphones are mainly used for communication, and that is the primary reason for using the Internet.

Most of the Roma do not know how to communicate properly via e-mail, including writing messages and attaching documents. Online security is also a big issue, given that half of the Roma have difficulty assessing whether the information is reliable or not.

The DIRA project policy recommendations advise decision makers to provide free courses on basic Internet usage, e-mail etiquette, and online security. Moreover, part of the funding could be invested in devices, especially computers, for Roma adults who cannot afford them.

Bringing e-services closer to Roma adults and other vulnerable groups

Council Recommendation (2021/C 93/01) specifically advocates for enhancing digitalization as a transversal tool for education, where digital literacy is at the same time an essential component of literacy and basic life skills and a channel of access to learning opportunities [4].

The need for abilities and skills related to the use of e-services is increasing as most of the public services are available online, or where they are not, governmental institutions invest in making them available online. Generally, we can conclude that the majority of the Roma community lacks proper digital knowledge and skills that will enable them to use e-services. These include checking medical appointments, filling online forms (e.g. tax forms and social services forms), using electronic banking systems, performing online payments, filling service requests, etc.

Taking into account the experience from the conducted trainings, the DIRA project policy recommendations suggest developing free training programs (educational resources, tutorials, and interactive guides) related to e-services usage that address the specific needs and interests of Roma adults. During the training, information should be presented in a step-by-step manner, and, in addition to text-based instructions, audio instructions or video tutorials should be provided to assist users with limited literacy skills. The trainings should be divided into levels and planned taking into account the fact that most of the participants work, so the trainings should be organized at a time that fits the participants' work schedule. Moreover, personalized assistance options such as chat support, helplines, or in-person assistance centers for users who require additional help will be of particular importance.

Provide Roma adults with access to quality education and good practices for acquiring modern digital skills and competencies

The troubling educational situation of Roma children advocates the need for further measures to promote educational inclusion and highlights the clear risk posed by the digital gap to Roma children [5].

Educational integration is the main means of achieving equal opportunities for education and the position of Roma children in society. Their inability to perform basic online tasks and access e-services, which could be observed during the training of the participants, is due to their low level of education or lack thereof, including poor foreign languages skills.

Based on the aforementioned, the DIRA project policy recommendations propose the implementation of digital literacy programs in education to provide individuals with the necessary skills that prepare them for active participation in the digital society. Additionally, support for multiple languages must be provided, and the content must be culturally sensitive and inclusive. The content should be accessible to users from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This could involve offering translations of key content into multiple languages and incorporating culturally relevant imagery and examples.

Incorporating user feedback for continuous improvement

Continuous monitoring of user feedback is particularly important in order to identify areas for improvement and to develop the digital services accordingly.

For these reasons, the DIRA project policy recommendations suggest regularly updating the proposed programs (educational resources, tutorials, *and interactive guides) based on user needs, user input, and technological advancements. The methods could involve conducting usability tests with representative users, analyzing user behavior data, and implementing changes to address identified issues and pain points.*

Implementing digital inclusion initiatives, community outreach programs, and accessible public services on local level

The local governing body can collaborate with Internet service providers to offer subsidized Internet plans for low-income households. This initiative would increase access to e-services for Roma who struggle to afford Internet connectivity. Moreover, the local governing body can reach out to volunteers trained to provide one-on-one assistance, helping participants navigate e-services such as applying for government benefits or accessing healthcare resources online. The city council mandates that all new digital platforms and services developed by municipal departments must comply with accessibility standards.

The DIRA project policy recommendations strongly encourage partnerships between the local governing body and Internet service providers to offer subsidized Internet plans for low-income households. Establishing partnerships with local organizations and businesses to offer digital literacy training and support services will have a positive impact on vulnerable populations. Websites and online platforms should comply with accessibility standards.

Existence of interagency cooperation, funding allocation, regional standards, and guidelines on regional level

Regional government agencies can establish a task force on digital inclusion, comprising representatives from various departments such as education, social services, and technology. The regional government can allocate a portion of its budget to support digital inclusion projects, such as providing grants to local non-profit organizations that offer free computer classes. This funding will help to expand access to e-services and will narrow the digital divide within Roma communities.

Thus, the DIRA project policy recommendations encourage collaboration among regional agencies to streamline access to e-services and share best practices for digital inclusion. This can be supplemented by allocating regional funding to digital inclusion programs and initiatives, prioritizing areas with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Regional standards and guidelines for the design and implementation of e-services should be developed in order to ensure accessibility and inclusivity for all.

Existence of legislation on digital accessibility, digital literacy programs in education, and public-private partnerships on national level

Setting a national benchmark for accessibility and holding government agencies accountable is necessary for providing inclusive e-services. Schools should pay attention to Roma migrant communities' children while integrating digital literacy education into the national curriculum, starting from primary school. Resources and expertise from multiple sectors should be leveraged to address infrastructure gaps and promote digital inclusion nationwide.

The DIRA project policy recommendations propose the enactment of legislation requiring government websites and digital services to comply with accessibility standards in countries where such legislation has not yet been adopted. Digital literacy education should be integrated into migrants' programs to provide individuals with the necessary skills to access and use e-services effectively. Fostering partnerships between government, industry, and civil society organizations can help to expand Roma communities' access to affordable Internet connectivity and devices.

Promoting a global digital inclusion agenda, technology transfer and capacity building, and cross-border data accessibility on international level

Fostering collaboration among countries to share best practices and resources for expanding access to e-services among Roma minorities can be a good practice. Technology transfer and capacity building can contribute to narrowing the digital divide on a global scale and promoting sustainable development. Moreover, cross-border data accessibility can enable migrant Roma individuals to access e-services seamlessly across different countries.

The DIRA project policy recommendations advocate for a global framework on digital inclusion that emphasizes equitable access to e-services for all populations, regardless of geographical location or socio-economic status. Technology transfer and capacity-building initiatives should be facilitated to empower vulnerable Roma communities to develop and implement inclusive e-services tailored to their specific contexts and needs. Establishing mechanisms for cross-border data accessibility and interoperability is vital to facilitate seamless access to e-services across jurisdictions.

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