

Poland on the Way to the Information Society – Results of Comparative Surveys

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The objective of this article is to show changes in the perception of e-Inclusion policy in Poland. It is based on two surveys conducted at the beginning of 2007 and 2009. The comparison of surveys helps to indicate the perception of the most important areas of the e-Inclusion policy in Poland and it shows trends of perception of the e-Exclusion problem in the following areas: groups threatened with e-Exclusion, the main barriers in the development of the Information Society, and the long-term strategy for elderly people. It also indirectly indicates the results of several government's actions preventing some group from being left behind. The lack of cheap and efficient infrastructure was indentified as the main problem in the development of the Information Society in Poland. But the situation in this area has improved which results in a greater concern about other problems.

Introduction

The development of ICT caused emergence of new concepts like knowledge management or e-commerce. These ideas were soon taken into account and placed into the strategies of numerous countries. Opportunities provided by new technologies have seemed to be really impressive. Almost immediate access to information can give a priceless competitive advantage, gaining and storage of knowledge help to build a unique corporation identity, which protects a company's advantages against simple copying. New possibilities enable the traditional economy to transform into the so-called new economy with its fast speed and never-ending workday.

The theory of radical change and instant development was very attractive, but life verified it shortly after. The Internet bubble, disappointing effects of knowledge management are the examples of a too optimistic approach, without a solid doze of common sense and reasonable expectations. These ideas are still up to date, but are not treated as the panacea for all problems.

It seems that the idea of the Information Society should be treated with a similar caution. The idea of the Information Society has been born with the understanding how remarkably ways of functioning societies would change. These changes cover communication between people in work as well as in the private life of the majority. Using ICT means to benefit from the range of advantages and being in better circumstances. The division into the people in a privileged position and those without access to ICT is called a digital gap. Closing this gap is to enable everyone to take the advantage of using ICT. This idea is called e-Inclusion.

The threat of e-Exclusion (analogically inability of some people to take part in a wider society because of the lack of access to ICT) has both social and financial consequences. That is why this matter needs actions developing the potential of communities as well as care of those who could be left behind. Programs of closing the digital gap should be reviewed all the time to avoid unfitness caused by a constantly changing

world and possible missed assumptions. Also, programs should be prepared and applied with regard to circumstances and differences of each country. Planning should be preceded by careful studies of the problem. Surveys should be repeated constantly to examine how the program solves the problem of e-Exclusion.

Surveys

In 2007 a survey was conducted to research the perception of e-Inclusion in Poland. A similar survey was repeated two years later: 186 respondents answered the same questions. The respondents of these both surveys were 20–24 year old students.

This group was chosen because students are open-minded, use ICT and, as educated people, have a better view of the general situation of Poland. Also, they have come from different environments and should be orientated in problems which affect the whole population. People, who do not use ICT and do not know possibilities, are often not able to describe their needs or create an effective policy. On the other hand, students could have a fragmentary cognition of the situation of some groups like older people. But despite this drawback, the student's awareness of the problem should be studied in the first place because they will make a great contribution to the development of the society in future and they will decide about problems even those which are not relevant to them.

Both surveys contained the same five questions:

1. Which social groups are threatened to be left aside in the development of the Information Society?
2. The EU has identified the key policy areas of the e-Inclusion initiative in the Riga Declaration 2006. Please arrange these areas according to the priority of knowing and understanding the circumstances in your country.
3. What are the most important barriers to the creation of an e-inclusive society in your country?

4. The EU and the Member States have expressed their special interest in securing the participation of the elderly people in social and economic life. In your opinion, what would be 3 most important steps in a long term strategy for this group?
5. In your opinion what instrument should be mobilized in the implementation of the e-Inclusion strategy?

Groups of concern

In Fig. 1, three most important groups endangered with e-Exclusion stand out: older workers and elderly people, people with a lower accessibility to ICT supported services, and people living in remote geographical areas. In both surveys, the aged people appeared as the group most threatened with e-Exclusion. The rise in the percentage of respondents, who indicate this answer (from 82,1% to 89,7%) may be caused by increasing awareness of greying Europe – the problem which some governments (e.g. Polish) try to solve by pulling the retiring age forward. Without proper skills and access to the ICT, old workers may have worse competing conditions as compared with others on the labour market. Due to their age and experience, seniors are predisposed to mental work, which nowadays is often connected with using ICT.

In 2009, people with a lower accessibility to ICT were indicated by about 15,4% less respondents than two years earlier. It is probably caused by the reducing number of this group, positive changes in prices and incomes and increasing awareness of the advantages of using ICT.

The perception of people living far from big centres as a group threatened with e-Exclusion has decreased (from 46,2% to 38,9%). It may be caused by the development of new, wireless technologies and better broadband coverage. Only in 2008 there was a 6,6% rise in the number of households with a broadband access to the Internet (Central Statistical Office, 2008). The most significant change of percentage is connected with the unemployed (from 28,2% to 12,4%). It may be caused by several public

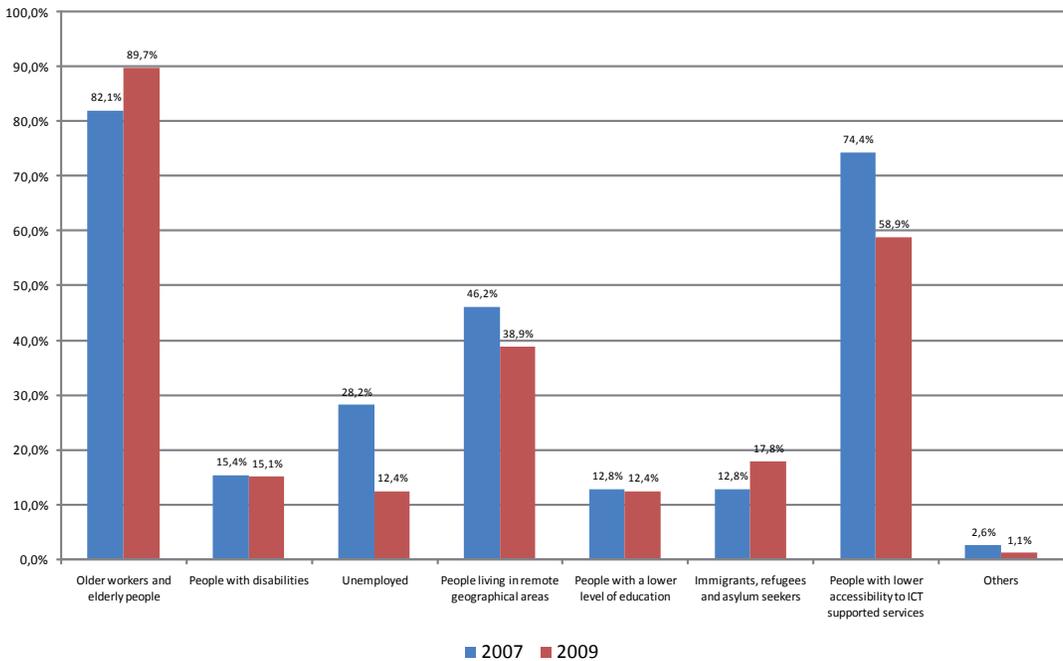


Figure 1. The groups threatened with e-Exclusion

programs and courses on the use of a computer designed for people without a job. Second reason might be the unemployment rate, which was lowest at the end of 2008 since the 90-ties: 9,1% in December of 2008 (Ministry of economy, 2009). Under this assumption unemployment seemed to be rather a temporary not permanent condition.

Priorities of e-Inclusion

Fig. 2 shows which areas the respondents indicated as most important. In both surveys enhancing eAccessibility and usability takes the first position (22,8% and 18,8% in 2009). It has been still perceived as the most important issue. The second position was changed from the reducing geographical digital divide to promoting Inclusive eGovernment (17,9%), which in 2009 was on the third place (17,2%) and is almost as important as improving digital literacy and competences (17,0%). It may indicate the improvement of infrastructure which becomes a less urgent problem, but of course needs further

changes. It also let us assume that, like in the Maslow pyramid, after building a kind of base (infrastructure) Poland is able to focus on the other aspect of the e-Inclusion policy (the increase of importance of the rest of the key policy areas).

Barriers of development

Fig. 3 shows the main barriers to the creation of an e-inclusive society. Again, the largest score was gained by technical aspects: limited broadband coverage (61,9%), high cost of internet access (60,8%), and the lack of ICT facilities (43,2%). The greatest changes are: decrease of the significance of limited broadband coverage (about 12,4% less) and increase of the significance of legislative and regulative barriers (7,9% more, that is, the rise about 154,8%).

These results are partly confirmed by an official report prepared at Institute of Adam Smith, Warsaw, Poland. According to the report there are incomparably high costs of connections in relation to broadband coverage and

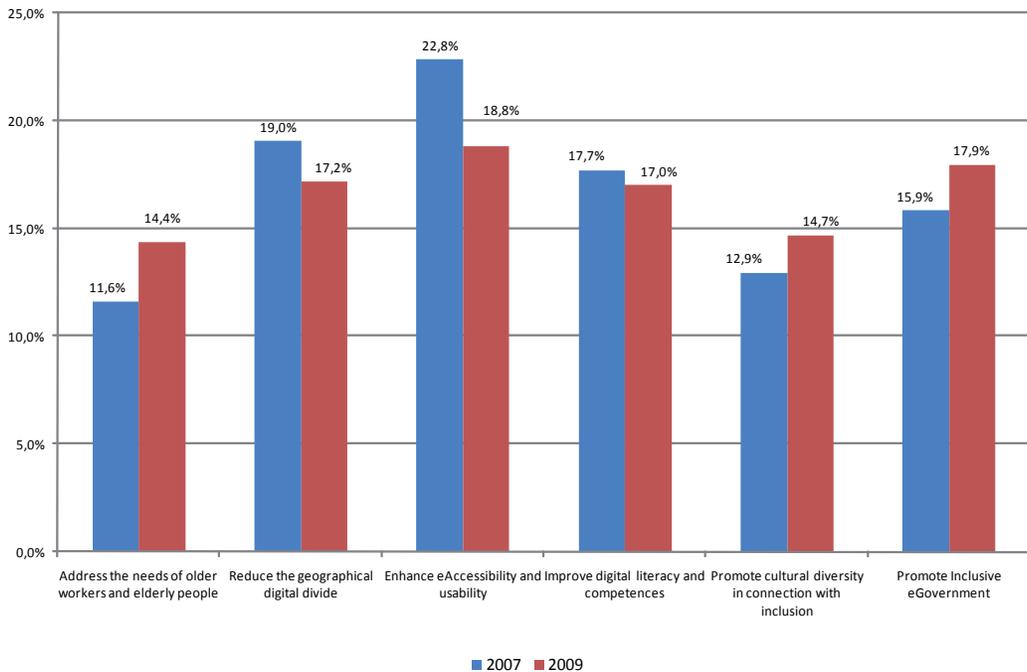


Figure 2. Perception of the priority of the key policy areas of the e-Inclusion initiative in the Riga Declaration 2006

still a weak infrastructure. It is caused mainly by lack of competition, excessive law regulations, and administrative barriers. As the main barriers of development of the ICT infrastructure these are: the monopoly of TPSA and ineffective prosecution against it. The others are: lack of investments, which is caused by the privileged position of UKE (Office of Electronic Communications), its unclear code of conduct

and making decisions, which is an additional risk of investments, the model of granting licences, which has failed, and higher than in the rest of Europe costs of settlements between different providers of the Internet. Additionally,

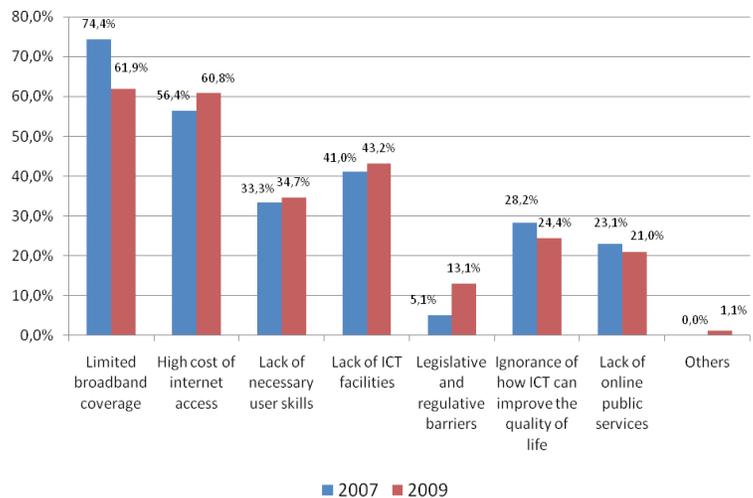


Figure 3. The main barriers

there are some redundant or simply unnecessary acts in building and infrastructure regulations, which make an investment complicated. The report also mentions some abortive government's courses of action.

The long-term strategy for elderly people

In Fig. 4, the proposed steps are shown in a long-term strategy for the aged people. In 2009, the respondents indicated the following steps as most important: provision of the free online training content and courses (61,4%), ensuring the use of public facilities at such schools and libraries for the training courses (54,5%) as well as access to IT facilities. The last two of these activities were also indicated as very important in the previous survey. It is probably the next confirmation of the lack of accessibility to the Internet. The highest drop refers to launching public campaigns with the aim of rising awareness of the benefits of ICT (21,5% less). It may be caused by the fact, that awareness of the advantages of ICT in general has risen in the society. It also might be a signal that seniors need more practical help.

Implementation of the e-Inclusion strategy

Fig. 5 shows that the highest appreciation as the appropriate instruments for the implementation of the e-Inclusion strategy has been gained by: industry management projects funded by the national or EU authorities (78,4%), public funded and managed projects (65,3%) and the private-public partnership (48,9%). It seemed that the respondents indicated as less important instruments with an international factor. This choice may, e.g., emphasize the awareness of differences between countries, but this problem should be examined carefully.

Summary

Poland is, for sure, on the way towards the Information Society, but despite the level of development achieved so far, it has remained at the very end of Europe (European Commissions Information Society and Media Directorate-General, 2008). The survey's results let one assu-

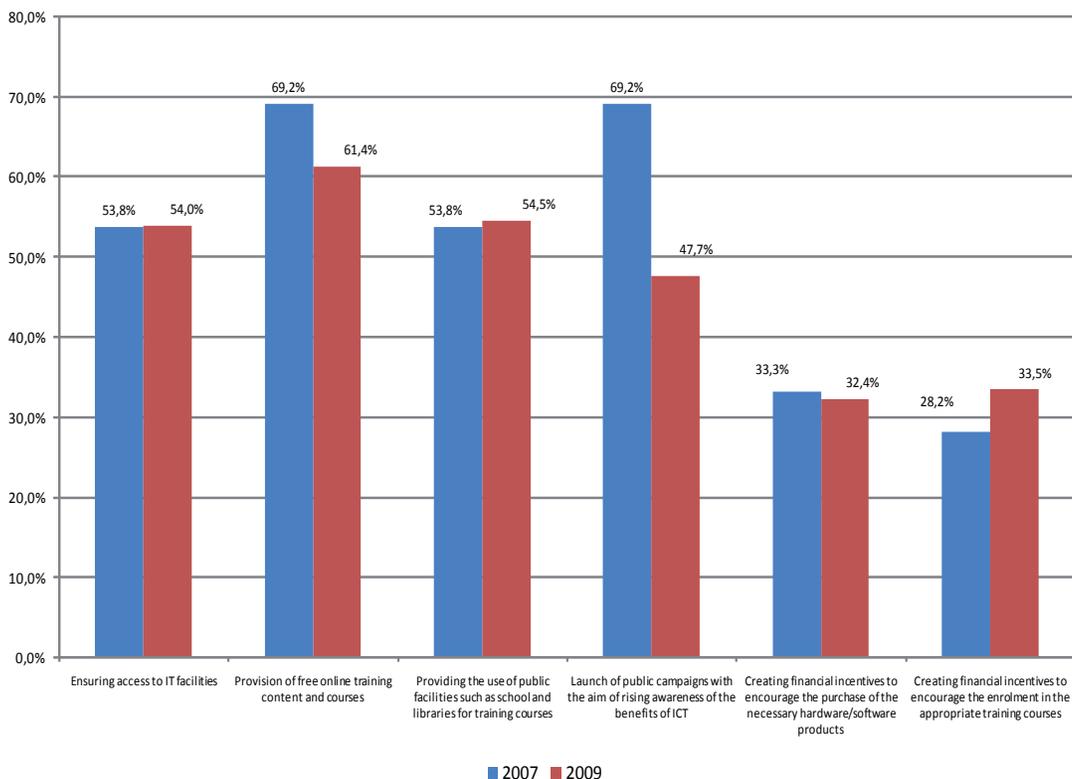


Figure 4. The most important steps in a long-term strategy for the elderly people

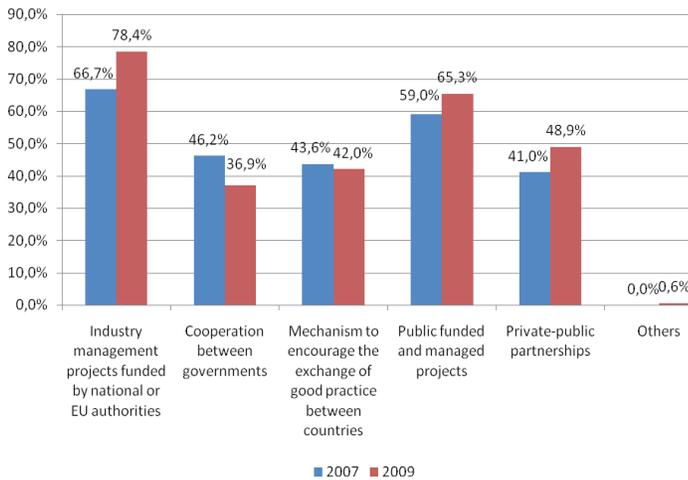


Figure 5. The instruments to be applied in the implementation of the e-Inclusion strategy

me that still the most urgent problem to solve is infrastructure: limited broadband coverage and a high cost of access to the ICT. To overcome this barrier, the support of the authorities is essential.

The Information Society is not an artificial creation, but rather a result of a kind of evolution, an adaptation of communities to the new conditions.

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From this point of view it can be assumed that Poland needs only some good conditions, technical base, more liberal and clear law to develop the idea independently of other, further government incentives. Enterprises will introduce and develop new technologies because it will give them profits. People will use ICT, because it will be required at work or it may be simply easier.

But the other problem – a greying Europe is far worse and more difficult to solve. Maybe it is worth considering what the profile of a future older worker is, what kind of work, after changes in the retiring age, will be proper for an elder person in the future. Maybe older workers, who possess experience and ability of using new technology could work in the branches closely related with ICT? But what will be with the youth and jobs for them? These and more questions should be put not to let these great expectations and opportunities down.

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LENKIJOS KELIAS Į INFORMACINĘ VISUOMENĘ: LYGINAMŲJŲ APŽVALGŲ REZULTATAI

Marta Milosz

Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – parodyti el. įtraukties politikos Lenkijoje suvokimo pokyčius. Remiamasi dviem apžvalgomis, atliktomis 2007 ir 2009 m. pradžioje. Šių apžvalgų palyginimas padeda nustatyti kaip buvo suvokiamos svarbiausios el. įtraukties politikos sritys Lenkijoje ir parodo el. įtraukties problemos suvokimo kitimo tendencijas, susijusias su grupėmis, kurioms el. įtrauktis kelia grėsmę, informacinės visuomenės kūrimo pagrindinėmis kliūtimis, pagyvenusiems žmonėms

skirta ilgalaikė strategija. Be to, apžvalgų lyginimas netiesiogiai atskleidžia tam tikrų vyriausybės veiksmų, kuriais siekta, kad tam tikros žmonių grupės neatsidurtų informacinės visuomenės nušalyje, rezultatus. Nustatyta, kad svarbiausia informacinės visuomenės kūrimo Lenkijoje problema ta, kad nebuvo pigios ir efektyvios infrastruktūros. Tačiau šiuo metu situacija pagerėjo, o tai savo ruožtu padeda geriau spręsti ir kitas informacinės visuomenės kūrimo problemas.