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INTEGRATION OF DIGITALIZATION IN THE SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION. SYSTEM FOR OLDER ADULTS, FINDINGS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Valbona Tolli*

*Directorate of Social Inclusion Policies. Ministry of Health and Social Welfare

Abstract

Access and inclusion in the use of technological tools hold particular importance in the process of integrating digitalization across institutional systems. Accelerated digitalization, which became a necessity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has focused public policy attention on the significance of digital inclusiveness while simultaneously highlighting social challenges and inequalities caused by the lack of access to technological tools and internet connectivity among disadvantaged groups, including older adults.

This paper aims to analyze how Albania is coping with this digital transformation by examining older adults' access to technological tools and institutional efforts to ensure active inclusion in public policy design and access to digital services.

The methodology in this study adopts a mixed-method approach, as it combines quantitative analysis (e.g: percentages of technology use, reported challenges) with qualitative analysis (e.g., perceptions of older adults, interviews with institutional staff).

The research includes a comprehensive review and examination of official national and international documentation, public online platforms/portals, as well as the implementation of structured interviews with individuals aged 65 and above.

The study sample consists of approximately 150 respondents (older adults, representatives of central and local institutions, and social care service providers). The collected data identified key challenges contributing to digital exclusion among older adults, such as lack of technological skills, limited access to digital devices, and insufficient institutional support. At the same time, the rapid digitalization process offers opportunities to improve older adults' quality of life if accompanied by appropriate policies in education, equipment provision, and assistance.

The findings indicate that the use of digital technology reduces or mitigates social exclusion and creates opportunities for social inclusion and access to public services for vulnerable groups, including older adults. The results serve as recommendations to support public policy priorities for inclusion and access to technological tools, aiming for a more inclusive and sustainable approach.

Keywords: *Digitalization; Older Adults; Social Inclusion and Protection; Access to Public Services; Digital Education.*

INTRODUCTION

Global Digitalization

Digital transformation is one of the main priorities of contemporary development, aiming to continuously improve processes, strategies, and services through digital technologies. It facilitates process automation, cost reduction, and efficiency enhancement, enabling more personalized and accessible services for citizens.

Today, digitalization has profoundly influenced how people live, work, and communicate. Public institutions and the private sector have been compelled to adapt to new technologies to improve competitiveness and development. Social networks, electronic systems, and digital platforms have facilitated communication, information exchange, and access to public services. However, alongside benefits, digital transformation also brings challenges that exacerbate digital inequalities, particularly affecting individuals lacking technological skills or internet access.

At the European level, digital rights and principles guarantee data protection, privacy, and equal access to services for all individuals. Countries such as France and Latvia have developed legal frameworks ensuring equal access to innovative technologies. As technological developments accelerate, it is essential to acknowledge that not all countries are equally prepared to adapt to digital innovation; therefore, evolving policies and equal access remain crucial to making digital transformation inclusive and sustainable.

Digitalization in Albania

Digitalization, as a key factor in accelerating the process of European integration, is helping Albania take steps toward sustainable development and the modernization of society and the digital economy. The country's commitment to digitalizing public services aims at integration and inclusiveness, focusing on ensuring services that are effective, transparent, and standardized for every individual. Currently, the use of digital technology in public institutions is primarily concentrated on access to public services¹ such as pensions, social assistance, telemedicine, psychological counseling, and others².

Significant efforts have been made to digitalize the delivery of public services, with the e-Albania platform serving as a successful example. Citizens are offered access to a wide range of services through this platform, which stands as one of the main pillars of public service digitalization. The e-Albania platform provides more than 1,250 electronic services for citizens and businesses, enabling applications for documents, certificates, building permits, economic assistance, and other services without the need for physical presence at state offices. Furthermore, to increase efficiency and transparency, there is a growing trend toward automating inter-institutional procedures through the integration of online systems and databases.

Despite these advancements, the development process faces several obstacles and challenges related to access and the use of innovative technological tools, stemming from cultural and educational gaps among certain generations and economic limitations in acquiring technological devices-issues that are particularly evident among vulnerable social groups. In major urban areas such as Tirana, Durrës,

1 *The program "Improving equal access to high-standard public services through the GovTech operation",*

2 <https://asetcenter.al/>; FREE accredited training for two new professional profiles in Albania, Home Assistance Operator; Remote Advice Line Operator;

Gjirokastrë, and Fier, the rollout of the 5G network has begun, aiming to reduce the digital divide and implement high-speed internet connectivity even in remote areas. According to INSTAT statistics, 99.9% of citizens access the internet via smartphones, while 23.5% use laptops, 20.8% use desktop computers, and only 13.1%³ rely on other devices.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is also gaining broader application today. AI is a technology that uses algorithms and data to learn, predict, and automate processes across various fields. In Albania, the use of AI is still in its early stages, but there are clear opportunities for development in key sectors such as healthcare, public administration, banking, and education.

Moreover, the approach to technological digitalization is closely linked to the country's geographical, economic, and social context, making it essential to develop specific and tailored training programs aimed at achieving digital inclusion for all social groups, including older adults.

Legal and Institutional Framework Supporting the Digitalization Process in the Social Protection and Inclusion System in Albania

The legal and institutional framework regulating technological and innovative transformation is based on the principles of transparency, efficiency, and personal data protection, guiding the country toward a digital state integrated with European standards.

Legislation in the field of digital technology and the infrastructure of electronic services in Albania includes regulations and laws that support the digital functioning of public administration, online public services, cybersecurity, personal data protection, electronic communications, electronic identity, and electronic signatures, among others.

The review and analysis of the legal and institutional framework in this study focused on accessibility for inclusion and the challenges encountered in the use of digital technology tools and devices by social groups, primarily older adults.

Digitalization in the Social Protection and Inclusion System and its Impact on Older Adults in Albania

As part of the European integration process and administrative reforms, Albania has undertaken steps to digitalize public services, including those in the social protection and care sector. The development and implementation of digital systems in social care have become a priority for a modern and inclusive administration, aiming to increase transparency, improve access, and enhance efficiency in delivering assistance and services to vulnerable groups.

Through online platforms, electronic registries, and integrated databases, efforts have been made to improve transparency and enable faster case management through inter-institutional coordination. At the same time, access to technology aims to simplify service delivery and ensure a fairer, more transparent, and efficient approach for all citizens, particularly for the most vulnerable groups in society.

However, the digitalization process also brings challenges for social groups, including older adults. Many older individuals face difficulties in using electronic devices, lack technological knowledge, or have limited internet access, which can lead to digital exclusion, self-isolation, and social inequality.

3 *chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.avokatipopullit.gov.al/media/manager/website/reports/03%20Raporti%20Shqip%20Digjitalizimi%20i%20sh%C3%ABrbimeve%20Pdf.pdf*

This makes it essential for digitalization to be accompanied by supportive measures such as tailored training, administrative assistance, and auxiliary services for older adults who benefit from digital technologies.

On the other hand, digitalization has introduced significant conveniences, such as opportunities to access real-time information, apply for various benefit schemes within deadlines, communicate more easily with institutions or relatives, and stay informed about their rights and entitlements.

In conclusion, digitalization in the social protection and inclusion system in Albania is an ongoing process which, if accompanied by inclusive policies and an accessible approach to the needs of social groups, offers real opportunities to improve their well-being and quality of life, including that of older adults.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining a review of the literature in the field of digital technology with an analysis of data collected through questionnaires regarding the level of access and the challenges encountered in the use of digital technology.

- *Study Sample*

The study sample consisted of 150 individuals, including:

- Older adults,
- Representatives (managers/staff) of public institutions at central and local levels,
- Managers/staff of community-based day social centers focused on older adults.

Of this sample, 130 individuals completed the questionnaires, of whom 80 were male and 50 female. This selection ensures adequate representation for analyzing data on access and challenges in using digital technology.

- *Types of Research Questions*

- Open-ended questions, Semi-structured questions and Interviews.

- *Dependent and Independent Variables*

- Dependent variable: Level of access to the use of digital technology tools/devices.
- Independent variable: Level of challenges encountered in obtaining integrated services.

- *Analysis of the Study*

The data analysis in this study was conducted using a combined approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected through interviews and questionnaires featuring open-ended and semi-structured questions, allowing respondents to provide comprehensive answers.

Based on the main objectives conveyed through the research questions, a summary of the findings is presented below in percentages (%) and graphical form for both levels:

A. Use of Digital Technology Tools (%)

- Older adults 15%
- Institutions 50%
- Organizations 35%

Graphical representation A, in (%)

B. Challenges Faced by Older Adults in Using Technological Tools

- Lack of knowledge in using technological devices 25%
- Lack of technological skills among older adults 35%
- Lack of technological devices 20%
- Poor internet connection 5%
- High cost 15%

Graphical Representation B (in %)

From the analysis of the collected data and reviewed literature, it is evident that the following platforms and systems— *e-Albania*, the Electronic System for Managing Economic Assistance, the National Social Registry, the Electronic Registry for Persons with Disabilities (PAK), as well as the reporting and monitoring systems for social services—are designed with the primary objective of supporting and ensuring equal access for all social groups, including older adults.

Government Platform “e-Albania” - the government platform “e-Albania” is the official interactive portal for delivering electronic services, administered and developed by the National Agency for Information Society. It serves as a gateway through which any interested individual can access online electronic services provided by public institutions in Albania. The platform also enables online payments for services via debit and credit cards, such as economic assistance, disability pensions (PAK), social housing programs, energy compensation, and more. The availability and accuracy of each service is the responsibility of the respective institution that offers its electronic service through this portal.

Electronic System for Managing Economic Assistance -this system allows for the application, evaluation, and automatic selection of beneficiaries of economic assistance and is interconnected with other state/public systems for automatic verification of social and economic criteria.

National Social Registry (NSR) - the NSR functions as an integrated data platform for individuals and families in need. It is used by municipalities for drafting local policies and planning social services.

Electronic Registry for Persons with Disabilities (PAK) - this registry manages and monitors the social treatment of persons with disabilities, including older adults with disabilities.

Impact of Digital Technology on Social Protection and Inclusion - the use of digital technology in the social protection and inclusion system has resulted in significant improvements that have positively influenced the quality of life and well-being of older adults, including:

- Easier and faster communication with family members through phone calls, video calls, messages, and various digital platforms;
- Simpler and more secure access to documentation and public services, such as pensions, healthcare, social assistance, and other administrative services;
- Access to information and digital education on issues related to health, nutrition, physical activity, and psychological well-being;
- New opportunities for social and cultural inclusion online, through participation in virtual activities and interactive platforms for older adults.

- **Results:**

The responses indicate that approximately 70% of respondents (120 individuals) stated that the use of digital technology in the social protection and inclusion system through digital training and education for older adults plays an increasingly essential role in enhancing their social inclusion and ensuring equal access to public services.

It is emphasized that the use of digital technology in the field of social protection and inclusion enables the provision of services that are more accessible, faster, and more sustainable for all individuals, including older adults. Particular importance is given to cases involving older adults who often face social isolation, physical limitations in mobility, lack of communication, and weak interpersonal connections with relatives, especially those living in rural areas.

In this context, more proactive policies are required to promote inclusion and continuous use of digital technology tools by older adults, as this directly contributes to reducing social exclusion and narrowing the gap in interaction with relatives and friends, thereby improving their quality of life.

Furthermore, there is widespread use and significant access to the e-Albania platform and other technological applications, primarily through mobile phones and tablets, which serve for applications in cash benefit schemes such as economic assistance (NE), disability payments (PAK), as well as pension systems and other integrated services.

As part of the social care reform, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, as a strategic priority, has aligned its program for the digitalization of social care services, engaging all actors at both central and local levels. One of the main innovations of this reform is the National Electronic Registry of Social Care Services (MIS), which functions as an integrated information system for the administration, identification, referral, intervention, and monitoring of social services. This system uses a unique identification mechanism with single sign-on, enabling unified access to three core systems:

- Economic Assistance
- Disability Services
- Social Services

The National Electronic Registry of Social Care Services (MIS) has had a significant impact by:

- Simplifying procedures for applicants and reducing bureaucratic delays;
- Providing real-time information for every applicant;
- Managing and tracking cases through interaction at all local and central levels;
- Improving the quality and transparency of services offered;
- Collecting and processing unified, high-quality data in real time.

Based on the information and data, the entire process of digitalization (*electronic devices, computer systems, networks, and software that store, process, and transmit information in digital form*) within the social protection and inclusion system implies the use of technology to automate, simplify, and improve access to the provision of care and public services for social groups.

FINDING

Policy and strategic documents in the field of social protection and inclusion have a specific objective: ensuring accessibility for the digital inclusion of citizens, including those aged 65 and above. Through the implementation of digital technology across all policy frameworks⁴, the aim is to reduce and/or mitigate social exclusion and create opportunities for inclusion and access to public services.

Based on information collected through questionnaires and interviews, it is evident that the lack of financial and technological resources, combined with insufficient skills and knowledge to use them, has hindered access to real-time services. Below are some of the key findings:

Research on the legal and institutional framework for integrating digitalization in the field of social inclusion and services in Albania shows that it supports vulnerable groups, including older adults, but is still not fully adapted to their specific needs and challenges. The main findings include:

- Strengthening institutional capacities, technological education, and cybersecurity significantly influence the effective use of digital technology;
- Older adults in rural areas have more limited access to digital technology;
- The legal and institutional regulatory framework for digital transformation in the social protection and inclusion system in Albania contains new legal and technical concepts that require continuous development and progress;
- Increasing access and improving technological skills among older adults, along with assistance in their use, promotes social equality for an independent, active, and healthy life;
- Lack of or difficulties in digital education for older adults in using technology pose a risk of exclusion and social isolation;
- The low number of centers/companies offering technical support and assistance makes it difficult to use technology and access platforms, banking applications, online health services, etc.;
- There are ongoing initiatives through pilot projects in community centers that provide training/assistance in using digital technology (simplified applications) for older adults.

Positive Effects of Digitalization and Service Innovation

- Improvement in the quality of life of older adults;
- Reduction of lengthy bureaucratic procedures and administrative abuse;
- Increased transparency and trust in institutions;
- Social inclusion and opportunities for communication with family and the community;
- Enhanced access for older adults to obtain information and online services.

Challenges and Key Barriers Encountered

The process of digitalizing public services within the social protection and inclusion system presents considerable challenges for older adults, often affecting the effective realization of their social and economic rights. Despite the benefits brought by digitalization, many older individuals face difficulties due to a lack of technological skills, financial costs for devices and internet access, and insufficient ongoing technical support.

Although inclusion is addressed in policy and strategic documents, the absence of technological de-

⁴ *Policy Document on Ageing and Action Plan 2025-2030; Primary Health Care Strategy 2020–2025; Social Protection Strategy 2024-2030; Social Inclusion Policy Document 2024–2028;*

vices, combined with limited knowledge and digital skills, creates a series of challenges faced both by public and non-public inter-institutional staff at central and local levels, as well as by older adults themselves, as outlined below:

- Lack of or limited access to digital knowledge and experience, including for older adults with disabilities and those in rural areas;
- High cost of technological devices for older adults with low/social pensions and no income;
- Lack of digital literacy makes it difficult for older adults to use platforms or technological systems, banking applications, or online health services;
- Absence of personalized digital services for older adults, as there are no simplified applications or platforms specifically designed for elderly users or those with disabilities;
- Low number of support staff providing technical assistance or training for this age group;
- Poor or absent internet connectivity in remote rural areas, limiting older adults' access to inclusion;
- Fear or uncertainty regarding misuse of personal data online;
- Limited technological capacities and equipment in local institutions such as municipalities and administrative units (untrained staff, lack of devices, etc.);
- Lack of standards for technology accessibility, especially for older adults with disabilities.

To address these challenges, it is essential that public institutions at both central and local levels provide adequate support, ensure technical assistance, and guarantee clear and comprehensive information for all older adults.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ Conclusions

The study highlights the need for appropriate training programs, technological assistance, stable internet connectivity, and financial support through strategic inter-institutional partnerships at both central and local levels to facilitate the use of technology applications dedicated to older adults.

An anticipated outcome of the study, aligned with the implementation of measures under the National Action Plan on Ageing 2025–2030⁵, is the provision of social protection and improved access to integrated social and health services that are tailored and of high quality for older individuals (including those who are isolated or have lost functional abilities) through the use of digital technology.

Furthermore, an inclusive approach to technology use enhances the quality of life and ensures public services for the social inclusion of older adults, accompanied by personal data protection, staff training, and social inclusion policies that reduce the digital divide.

Digital technological transformation also contributes to system automation, cost reduction, efficiency improvement, and innovation, while requiring careful management by trained staff to address challenges and cybersecurity risks. Improving access and inclusion of older adults in the use of digital technology serves as an opportunity to prevent isolation and social exclusion, fostering socialization and enabling a dignified and quality life for this social group.

The digitalization of services through education and awareness-raising among professionals and care-

⁵ Decision No. 315, dated 4.6.2025 On the approval of the Policy Document on Aging and the Action Plan 2025-2030;

givers will improve access to integrated and appropriate social-health services for older adults who are isolated or have lost functional abilities, as one of the specific objectives of the ageing action plan.

Albania has now entered an important phase of technological transformation, steering development toward the digitalization of public and non-public services. This process aligns with national commitments to modernize governance, increase transparency, and strengthen social inclusion.

In the field of social protection and care, digitalization is assuming an increasingly essential role, aiming to improve service quality through digital education and awareness. This approach contributes to building a more effective, transparent, and standardized system that guarantees equal access for all social groups, including older adults.

➤ Recommendations

The integration of digital technology development in the field of social protection and inclusion aims to ensure access and inclusiveness for various social groups, with particular attention to vulnerable groups, including older adults.

Aligned with European standards, Albania is responsible for guaranteeing the fulfillment of fundamental rights, including socio-economic rights. At the same time, it has the obligation to provide appropriate innovative technological tools to meet citizens' essential needs in cases of disasters, illnesses, disabilities, and old age. The right of older adults to live with dignity is closely linked to the ability to have equal and guaranteed access to public services, which directly contribute to improving their quality of life and well-being.

Based on the findings of this study, the importance of improving access, equality, and service quality through the integration of digitalization in the field of social inclusion for older adults is emphasized. The following recommendations are proposed:

- Develop national programs and supportive policies for digital inclusion tailored to the needs of social groups, including older adults;
- Increase the number of innovative, age-friendly community centers equipped with technical assistance and professional support in every administrative unit/municipality to provide direct and continuous technological assistance for older adults;
- Ensure more accessible digital technologies through simplified applications with voice commands and/or audio-visual/Braille options for older adults with special needs (visual or hearing impairments, etc.);
- Strengthen partnerships through inter-institutional cooperation among public and non-public institutions and civil society organizations to improve digital policies adapted to the specific needs of social groups, including older adults;
- Enhance innovative technologies to promote intergenerational solidarity in providing digital assistance to older adults in friendly environments;
- Implement awareness campaigns and public education initiatives aimed at strengthening cybersecurity through specialized training for older adults on internet safety, avoiding digital fraud, and protecting personal data;
- Develop digital skills for social groups, including older adults, to increase their employment opportunities in the labor market after reaching retirement age;
- Invest in infrastructure and accessibility to ensure and strengthen technical and resource capacities with a sensitive approach to the digital transformation of vulnerable groups, including

- older adults;
- Continuously improve equal access to public services through the “GovTech” operation, aiming to foster inclusive dialogue on access to digital services for vulnerable groups;
- Introduce legal measures and supportive techniques that directly address social, economic, and technological barriers faced by older adults and staff in public institutions/private companies;
- Establish partnerships and cooperation agreements between institutions and organizations with companies/centers/educational institutions specializing in technology to develop knowledge on using applications for providing technical support to social groups, including older adults.

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- DCM No. 337, dated 04.06.2021 “On the Administration of the Government Platform e-Albania”;
- DCM No. 370, dated 01.06.2022 “Cross-Sectoral Strategy: Albania’s Digital Agenda and Action Plan 2022–2026”;
- DCM No. 315, dated 04.06.2025 “On Approval of the Policy Document on Ageing and the Action Plan 2025–2030”;
- National Strategy for Information Society and Digitalization 2021–2026;
- National Strategy for Social Protection 2024–2030;
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – EU legal act (effective May 25, 2018);
- Social Inclusion Policy Document 2024–2028;
- Primary Health Care Strategy 2020–2025;
- Program “Improving Equal Access to High-Standard Public Services through the GovTech Operation”;
- Report “Digitalization of Public Services and Protection of Human Rights in Albania,” prepared by the Ombudsman with support from the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions;

Responsible Institutions

- National Agency for Information Society (AKSHI) – Implements digital policies and manages national systems;
- Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP) – Regulates the electronic communications market;
- National Authority for Cybersecurity (AKSK) – Oversees, coordinates, and enforces cybersecurity measures;
- Commissioner for the Right to Information and Personal Data Protection – Ensures compliance with GDPR;
- Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MSHMS) & Local Government Units/Municipalities – Ensure access to inclusive and accessible online documentation and services for social groups.