

[PR] Everyone must have access to essential services, without necessarily using digital technology

On 30 January, Lire et Ecrire, along with hundreds of associations and scientists, delivered an open letter calling on EU institutions to guarantee access to essential services.

As part of the 'Right to offline' campaign launched by Lire et Ecrire, 650 associations and scientists from across Europe have signed an open letter calling for a moratorium on the digitalisation of essential services.

A pause is needed in order to adopt laws that guarantee human contact with these services, and to allow for a large public debate on the role that digital technology should have in our societies.

This European campaign condemns the discriminatory nature of the digitisation of essential services (banking, postal services, administrative services, etc.) for the most vulnerable people.

Today, over 40% of Europe's population lack basic digital skills.

The event, organised by the non-profit organisation Lire et Ecrire at the invitation of three MEPs - Estelle Ceulemans (S&D), David Cormand (Greens) and Catarina Martins (The Left) - featured a number of speeches calling for greater attention to be paid to these digitally vulnerable people.

'Digital must be accessible, and essential services must be accessible to all,' said Estelle Ceulemans, MEP in the Socialists and Democrats Group and former Secretary General of the Belgian trade union FGBT Brussels. *'We need you, civil society, to feed our recommendations'*, she added.

Among the groups facing the greatest difficulties with digital technology are the elderly, people with few qualifications, the illiterate, the unemployed, as well as women, people with disabilities and people with precarious migration status.

Marthe Diomande, a literacy student at Lire et Ecrire, recounted her experience on behalf of all people experiencing illiteracy: *'We go to the bank, we're asked to go to the terminal, we start to panic, everyone's looking at us. The shame, the panic, it's unbearable. We feel rejected, abandoned and useless to society. We no longer have a private life because we are dependent on our children or strangers to help us.'*

What can the EU do to guarantee equal access to essential services for all?

The European Union and its Member States recognise the urgent need to train people in digital skills and to set up digital assistance schemes to help people in difficulty.

For Lire et Ecrire and the signatories of the open letter these responses are not enough. Human contact in essential services must also be guaranteed.

The signatories of the open letter are calling for the adoption, at European level, of legislation guaranteeing the maintenance and funding of non-digital channels. Helpdesks, phone lines and postal services must be of high quality, available in sufficient quantity, and not entail additional costs for users.

‘Digital technology poses problems for a large number of citizens, not just those most vulnerable to digital technology. We are aware of the urgent need for action in this area’, said Jiri Svarc (DG Employment, Head of Unit Social Rights/Inclusion), representing the European Commission.

David Cormand (MEP, France) raised the issue of the use of algorithms in social protection systems: *‘Algorithms introduce arbitrariness into administrations, even though they are presented as objective. In fact, digital technology is great if there is democratic control by citizens’*.

Finally, Catarina Martins (MEP, Portugal) closed the event reiterating the concerns and demands put forward by Lire et Écrire and the letter signatories: *‘Our lives are not as simple as “type 1 or type 2”’; we need to talk to each other’*.

Fighting to center human interactions

The development of digital technology is fundamentally challenging our societies. On a daily basis it prevents a large number of people from accessing their rights. It also invites us to reflect on the kind of society we want and the place that human relationships can take in it. Digitalisation is not just a technical issue, it's a political one.



Estelle Ceulemans (S&D, MEP) receives the open letter from Lire et Écrire signed by 650 organisations.

During the event on 30 January, EU policy-makers were offered the open letter (see photo) and asked to relay the demands of European civil society to the Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament, and to bring this important debate to life across Europe.



From left to right : Sarah Chaufouraux and Marthe Diomande (Lire et Écrire) ; Estelle Ceulemans (MEP, S&D) ; Louise Culot (Lire et Écrire) and David Cormand (MEP, Greens/EFA)

Press contact :

Cécilia Locmant, cecilia.locmant@lire-et-ecrire.be
+32 474 33 85 60