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SILHOUETTE

USING NOVEL INFORMATION
AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES
FOR THE SUPPORT OF ELDERLY'S ACTIVE
PARTICIPATION IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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ICT-based Support for the Elderly in REGION: Stakeholders' view

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Table of contents

SILHOUETTE

1. Introduction

The VSS team decided to interview stakeholders who:

a) are based or operate in Valle Sabbia, that is "project territory" in the strict sense (since "*Valle Sabbia Solidale*" is located here);

b) are based in the Province of Brescia, where Valle Sabbia is located (see the following map[1]) and that can be regarded as "project territory" from a wider point of view since it is the area involved in Creator Mini programme and thus in other sub-projects.

Given that our previous report "Practices for elderly people care in Valle Sabbia Solidale territory" had shown the lack of local ICT practices, the decision was taken to improve the possibility to collect relevant information and data according on the issues the Silhouette partnership had chosen to investigate with the interviews.

No representatives from the academic/research sector dealing with ICT and elderly needs was found: a professor from the local Faculty of Economics[2] who studies the relation among ICT and social innovation was contacted but refused to be interviewed for insufficient knowledge of the issue.

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[1] The map shows Valle Sabbia area (in green) within the wider area of Province of Brescia (in white), to better understand the relation among them.

[2] Università Statale di Brescia, Facoltà di Economia.

SILHOUETTE

In total thirteen people from twelve different organizations were interviewed. Vodafone was contacted since it is a company providing mobile and internet services in Valle Sabbia and in Brescia Province and it is involved in a prospect experimentation of mobile application for social workers (data collection), but even if accepted to participate, they did not send the interview in time.

The final results are rather critical. Even if some ICT practices are present in the wider territory of the Province and some stakeholders show to have a view on the issues raised, the general knowledge on the theme "ICT and elderly people" (and more generally ICT and social needs) appears to be scarce, rarely supported by hard data. Besides, stakeholders seem unable to define in precise terms what are the potentials or possible developments of ICT solutions in our territory.

The following scheme briefly present the stakeholders who were interviewed, divided among: public administration, care providers and companies.

Sector	Number	Description of roles
Public administration	5	• Director of "Economics, Employment and Training Department" - Provincia di Brescia • Director of ACB, Association of municipalities of Brescia and Province • Responsible of the area "Family and welfare activities" - Provincia di Brescia • Secretary of "Comunità Montana di Valle Sabbia" (local public authority associating all municipalities of the Valley) • Responsible of Social workers of Valle Sabbia Solidale
Care providers	4	• Manager of a Centre providing consulting services on ICT solutions for elderly and disabled people (to improve their possibility to live independently at home) funded by Fondazione Brescia Solidale • Director of "Fondazione Brescia Solidale" foundation in charge for elderly rest houses management • Coordinator of a facilitated computer lab for disabled people promoted by a social cooperative • Director of Laghi, consortium of social cooperatives and past president of the social cooperative Area, both located in Valle

		Sabbia
Companies	5	• Marketing Director of DiRete, a cooperative providing software and web solutions for companies and private users • Director of Secoval, public company providing hardware and software solutions, consulting and assistance to public administrations in Valle Sabbia • President of Fraternità Sebino, a social cooperative providing software solutions and assistance to companies and public administrations • Partner of Sixs, cooperative specialized in software consulting, services and solutions for non profit organizations and social enterprises

Unfortunately, some of them could not answer to all six questions of the interview, in the footnotes we will indicate on which answers the content is based.

Generally speaking, stakeholders from companies and from service providers seem to have a richer, more articulated view on the issue than stakeholders from public administration.

SILHOUETTE

2. Senior-oriented activities

2.1. Supporting the elderly communities in the region

All public administrations we interviewed are involved in designing, managing and delivering social and care services to elderly people of the types described in the following scheme.

Services to support the elderly	
Care services	Helpline
	Home assistance (home cleaning, company, small chores, bathing..)
	Home delivering of meals
	Elderly rest houses
	Transportation to hospital or therapeutic facilities
Income support	Allowances for medicine, rent or other house expenses…
Recreational activities	Holidays
	Parties
	Recreational centres
	Sport and health activities

They therefore can be regarded as supporting the elderly in their territory.

Provincia, Comunità Montana and ACB are mainly regulatory and coordination authorities, whereas municipalities plus social enterprises and foundations are care providers, ie the organizations in charge for delivering the services to citizens.

One of the care providers is a consortium of social cooperatives. Social cooperatives are enterprises providing welfare services: they either deliver social services of different kind for different target groups[3] or develop an entrepreneurial activity with the aim of employing socially disadvantaged people[4]. The consortium Laghi includes cooperative of both types and is one of the main provider of social and elderly care services in Valle Sabbia.

The Foundation "Brescia Solidale" was established with the only mission to design and manage housing solutions for the elderly who cannot anymore live independently at their homes, with different levels of support/autonomy (from small home like communities to full support rest houses).

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[3] Cooperative of type a) according to the Italian law.

[4] Cooperative of type b) according to the Italian law or WISE Work Integration social enterprise according to EU definition.

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The other two (the ICT consulting service and the computer lab for disabled) are not specifically aimed at elderly people care. The objective for which they were created was to offer services and support to disabled people of any age and of any kind of disability. They occur to assist also elderly people in two cases:

- Due the ageing of their disabled patients;

- When age or age related diseases make people somehow unpaired (physically or mentally).

Thus they cannot be considered as specifically committed to support the elderly community, even if they happen to do it.

Considered the markets they operate and the services they provide, the companies we interviewed cannot be seen either as explicitly committed to support the elderly.

2.2.   Usage of ICT-based solutions in supporting the elderly

The usage of ICT in the services delivered by the organizations we interviewed is very limited. We found only the following practices:

- Helpline managed by ACB and Comunità Montana, for ill elderly people;

- Helpline, software for collecting and filing patient health data, limited experimentation of internet use (essentially mail program) to communicate with families, t-shirts that can check persons' heart rate, temperature and activity at Foundation Brescia Solidale;

- Courses in computer literacy for elderly organized in the past by DiRete and funded by a municipality but ended due to lack of public resources.

Both the Centre providing consulting for elderly and disabled people to support their independent life at home and the facilitated computer lab for disabled people base their activity on ICT (and domotic devices) but, as already mentioned, they are not specifically aimed at elderly people.

In 2012 the consortium of social cooperatives Laghi is testing the use of mobile phones (Androids, Blackberry, Oxs) by social workers delivering home support to the elderly. The devices can geo locate the worker and file daily data on:

- The service/services delivered;

- Elderly person health conditions.

The end of the pilot phase is foreseen for the end of 2012, then the device will be fully integrated in the home care management. At the time of the interview, also social cooperative Fraternità Sebino was planning a similar experimentation.

Finally, none out of the four companies we interviewed markets ICT services or products specifically designed to support the elderly, nor locally nor in other regions/countries, suggesting that at present this market segment is not seen as profitable.

SILHOUETTE

3. National, regional and local programs and strategies of supporting the elderly

3.1. Practical implementation of programs

The organizations we interview are very different by nature, scope and aims. Therefore it is very difficult to summarize the strategies according to which they operate.

Strategies and programs can have common features for public administrations and care providers and rather different for private companies.

Public administrations (such as Province of Brescia, Comunità Montana and Municipalities) are in charge of designing, monitoring and in some cases delivering social services because of a legislative mandate. They do so according to the Constitution, the principal national and regional laws regulating the different kind of services. The type and quantity of services, the form of management and resources allocated are decided with the so called "Piano di zona" (Local plan): introduced by the national framework law on welfare, is promoted by local PAs and requires the consultation of local social actors. When approved, it acts as overall planning framework for social services in a given territory:

- Analysing needs and problems;

- Establishing aims and priorities;

- Mapping private, non-profit and public economic, organizational and human resources to be involved;

- Establishing which services will be delivered and in which forms;

- Foreseeing monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Public foundations such as "Brescia Solidale" are created with the aim of delivering social services to one or more target groups, they act within the legislative framework described above and according to their Statute and regulations. Besides, under the control of the public owner, they approve and implement yearly or long term strategic plan that guide the management and development of the institution and its services.

Social enterprises are companies regulated by a specific national framework law. When acting as welfare providers, they are regulated by:

- The relevant national and regional laws,

- "Piano di zona";

- The contract, signed with the public authority, entrusting them the services.

None of the programs now implemented in the territory by the organizations we interviewed include specific strategies on the experimentation and development of ICT solutions within social services.

SILHOUETTE

3.2. Needs concerning creation and implementation of programs enabling wider usage of ICT[5]

Four people out of the respondents strongly stressed the need for an overall public policy on the usage of ICT to support the elderly. For one of them, the policy level should be regional, for another one instead the level would better be national; ICT strategies should therefore be regulated by a national framework law addressing the needs of both elderly and disabled citizens. All stakeholders asking for more public planning agreed on the point that policies and strategies must be adequately funded to allow experimentations to take place.

For another stakeholder, funding experimentation is one of the pillars to develop ICT solutions for the elderly.

One stakeholder called for greater cooperation among public institutions/agencies and one enlarged such cooperation to the private and no profit sectors as a winning factor. For another stakeholder (from a public administration) non profit organisations should be part of programs since they are trusted by citizens and seen as a friendly environment whose initiatives are more accepted.

Among care providers, one stressed the fact that elderly people remain autonomous, still living at home should be priority in public policies since they can benefit more by ICT solutions and avoid or postpone the need to move to residential services. He also stated that a more extensive usage of ICT in the delivering of different public services[6] could both improve their accessibility and increase public officers' and citizens' computer literacy.

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[5] From now on the content does not include answers from the Resposible of VSS Social workers, the manager of the informatic lab for disabled and the responsible of "Family and welfare activities" Area of Provincia di Brescia who felt they did not have sufficient information to complete the interview.

[6] Administrative, health services etc..

SILHOUETTE

4.   Benefits and barriers in implementing ICT-based solutions for supporting the elderly

4.1.   Benefits

In general ICT based solutions are seen as carrying an overall improvement in life quality for the elderly. Other stakeholders underlined other more specific benefits such as:

1. Self – determination, i.e. the possibility for the elderly to choose how and when to socialize without depending on somebody else's help;

2. More social inclusion and participation to community's life;

3. Avoidance of loneliness and its consequences on physical and mental wealth;

4. Social and cultural benefits since communication with others and information keep people curious and open to learning, stimulate the maintenance of cultural and social interests and facilitate social relations.

From the point of view of services delivering, ICT solutions can overcome space and time barriers and, on the prevention, cure and rehabilitation side have powerful applications.

What are the possible benefits for care providers and services delivering organizations seemed less evident, probably due to the lack of experiences on the field.

4.2.   Barriers

The barriers against the development of ICT solutions to support the elderly were indicated in several factors which we have divided in two categories:

A. Factors pertaining to the socio – economic context

B. Factors pertaining to the target group's features and behaviours

that are synthesized in the following tables.

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TABLE A. FACTORS PERTAINING TO THE SOCIO – ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Lack of economic resources, especially public funds

Insufficient availability of hardware (distribution of PC in family households, broad band coverage)

Lack of diffusion of/information on good practices

Low technological and ICT literacy in the adult population

Need for wide information and awareness campaigns (on ICT potentials)

Political and public leadership is old and lacks knowledge and understanding on ICTs

Small potential market

Retail sector who cannot/does not want to provide competent sale assistance to ICT buyers

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TABLE B. FACTORS PERTAINING TO THE TARGET GROUP'S FEATURES AND ATTITUDES

Low ICT and computing literacy

Fear and/or distrust of ICTs

„Cultural" gap (more evident in rural areas)

Elderly (and in general non ICT expert people) are not able choose/buy the right device

Progressive health and cognitive problems might result in squandering the training investment done to improve ICT literacy

Care givers'/families' fear of losing control on the elderly person.

Finally, one stakeholder underlined that, at enterprise level, the introduction of new ICT solutions often requires a great investment in economic and human resources, in training and organisational changes: such effort may act as a barrier for new developments.

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5. Potential of the region to utilize ICT-based solution for supporting activity of the elderly

5.1 The size of the regional market

For all but one the companies we interviewed the size of the (local and) regional market is potentially very wide.

But two of them think that such market will not take off without a specific public strategy and without funds and initiatives aimed at:

- Improving information and awareness on ICT

- Increasing ICT literacy

- Diffusing/mainstreaming the few best practices.

As somebody noticed, a scarce awareness/literacy reduces public administrations and family households' will to invest/spend on ICT devices and services since they can not fully appreciate its benefits. Therefore cultural limits impact on the size of the market.

According to one of them tough, the present economic crisis reducing public and family's resources is unfortunately a major obstacle in going in that direction.

5.2 The R+D and innovation potential

Only one among the companies interviewed has planned a specific cooperation with a research institution (based in another city of Regione Lombardia) for the common development of ICT solutions, the project is focused on developing support tools not for the elderly but for mentally and physically impaired people.

Therefore none of them could assess the RD/innovation potential of the issue investigated.

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6. Recommendations of regional stakeholders

Opinions and suggestions from the people we interviewed have mostly been included in previous paragraphs.

Only three remarks could not fit in the „Table of contents" and are therefore reported here.

- Somebody underlined as ICT training might benefit the elderly also by stimulating their mental and cognitive abilities.

- Somebody else called for great attention to properly assess costs and benefits when choosing among services based on ICT and services based on human relations, to avoid the risk of loosing the human content of welfare and social services.

- When reflecting on the differences and somehow distance among welfare and ICT sectors, one stakeholder suggested the need for „cultural mediators"[7], people with knowledge of both that could facilitate and foster the dialogue and help develop appropriate and adequate ICT solutions.

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[7] In Italy a „cultural mediator" is a professional, often foreigners, trained at the University/Master level, who facilitate the dialogue between public institutions (schools, health and social services, tribunals etc…) and citizens with different national, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

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