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Lighthouse Keepers of Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities – information about nation-wide educational program²

One of the most recent examples of the involvement of social forces in educational activities that minimize digital exclusion among senior citizens is an educational project of the “Cities on the Internet” Association. The project is titled “Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities.” It is hitherto the biggest undertaking in the area of digital education of Poles aged 50+. The project is carried out by the “Cities on the Internet” Association in collaboration with the Ministry of Administration and Digitization and is part of systemic solutions to the problem of digital exclusion in Poland. The key element of those activities is to educate over 2,800 volunteers that are, in turn, educators of those who want to gain new competences in the field of electronic media use. Digital Poland Lighthouse Keepers are local animators whose task is to encourage people from “generation 50+” to make their first steps on the Internet. Their activities are carried out by means of public points of Internet access – libraries, Volunteer Fire Service centers, call centers, schools and universities. Digital Poland Lighthouse Keepers are volunteers who become the agents of necessary civilizational transformation in Polish communes. Their role is to create a new quality in their own environment: to inspire, to teach and to help others use digital tools but also – and primarily – to encourage the digitally excluded to use Internet resources untutored. The most important element in a lighthouse keeper’s work is proper identification of the needs of their community in order to “tailor” the offer of

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possible activities. In other words, to adapt the latter to the needs of senior citizens. Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities campaign has been recognized internationally by being awarded the prestigious WSIS Project Prize 2012 (Tomczyk 2013). So far (that is until 02-11-2015) the Lighthouse Keepers have trained 273 788 seniors spending over 71 thousand hours on didactic activities with the oldest group of the digitally excluded.

Digital Poland project is one of the model examples of mobilizing social forces in local environments. The commitment of educators-lighthouse keepers in the process of reducing the phenomenon of digital exclusion among the pre-digital generation partly rebuts the myth of low involvement of Poles in social affairs. Actions within the Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities project not only allow the development of information society but also redefine the mechanisms of social resources activation in Poland.

Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities project is an unprecedented phenomenon of regular and long-term activation of volunteers committed to work for the benefit of people in senior age. It is hard to find other similar, cyclic educational undertakings in Poland. There are senior centers and U3As operating on regular basis, however they fulfill different functions, mainly social and cognitive ones.

Lighthouse Keepers are an extremely valuable group from the perspective of putting the idea of active ageing into practice. This initiative is particularly important in small cities, towns and villages where there are no abovementioned senior centers and U3As. In small, local communities volunteers contribute not only to the increase of level of digital competences among "older adults" but also transform the social space by building new quality human and social capital based on the commitment of various subjects (institutions, volunteers, seniors).

Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities program also creates an opportunity for different generations to get know one another and to learn. Thanks to education senior citizens gain access not only to popular services regularly used by members of information society but, first of all, are given the opportunity to enter the world of "digital natives". The latter are, among others, their own grandchildren. Project activities reinforce the need and legitimacy of inter-generational learning which for the last several years has remained less noticed in social practices.

Social forces such as Lighthouse Keepers are not just a simple form of voluntary service as they perform many important tasks in their environment. Lighthouse Keepers become mediums that link the resources of various institutions (e.g. free computer laboratories in schools, libraries, NGOs) with the needs of senior citizens. Conducting activities for seniors, educators enter into the role of experts, thus, guide the digitally excluded into the intricacies of digital world in a way that allows them to apply the gained knowledge and skills to their daily life. At the same time the volunteers of Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities serve as spokespersons of senior citizens by mobilizing public institutions to act for the benefit of the oldest generation. In addition, through educational

activities the Lighthouse Keepers become also stimulants of many positive changes in the lives of seniors, thus, popularize positive, active ageing.

Activity of people involved in the project and integration of local institutions allow a fresh, new look at the ways to increase human and social capital through education. Therefore, the project Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities has become one of the model solutions that need to be supported and developed. This is to be done not only in order to improve the statistics on reducing the phenomenon of digital division but – first and foremost – to build a civil society sensitive to the needs of ageing Poland.

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