

Digital Inclusion Luxembourg: A holistic solution to refugee inclusion, access, and sustainability

Michael J. Oghia

Ask any citizen of a European Union about the greatest challenges currently facing the 28-nation bloc, and refugees, immigration, climate change, and the economy will likely top the list. In fact, a recent YouGov [survey](#) of 13,000 people across 12 EU countries found that immigration, inequality, and the economy were indeed the main concerns, while a European Commission [survey](#) found that 91 percent of all EU citizens see climate change as a serious problem.

Solving even just one of these monumental challenges seems like a mammoth task, yet what if one solution could actually address all of them at once? After all, capitalizing on the digital skills of immigrants, refugees in particular, is a significant way to help such individuals [integrate](#), as does providing economic assistance based on those skills since migration is an overall [boon for the world](#). Moreover, [digital tools make it easier](#) for refugees to communicate with each other and support humanitarian efforts. Thus, by connecting immigrants and refugees to the Internet and ensuring they have [access](#) to information and communications technologies (ICTs), they can [participate](#) more effectively in the economy and contribute to their new society.

Taking a more holistic approach may therefore be *exactly* the way to solve these pressing issues, which is exactly what the team behind [Digital Inclusion](#) is doing in Luxembourg. Founded in February 2016 by Patrick de la Hamette and Isabelle Mousset, the two are driven to help improve the conditions of refugees in Luxembourg, all while spreading the word and inspiring others to help in their communities in Europe and around the world. I recently interviewed Patrick about the project, what motivated him to start it, and how others outside of Luxembourg can get involved or join local initiatives in their own community.

To get the project started, Patrick and Isabelle established Digital Inclusion as a non-profit organization in Luxembourg. They were awarded a grant for the project from a Luxembourgish public fund, the [Oeuvre Nationale de Secours Grande-Duchesse Charlotte](#), which issued a “mateneen” (call for projects) in the context of the 2015 refugee situation to promote inclusion of the local population together with the new arrivals. Far from being his day job, which happens to be software development, the project emerged during Patrick’s free time and resonated with the refugee community in Luxembourg. He envisioned a project that focuses on digital and social inclusion as well as environmental sustainability, and could address three different but interconnected issues:

1. Make information technology (IT) accessible to everyone, which includes access to the Internet, the technical equipment needed to do so, and promote digital literacy;
2. Promote social inclusion through digital technology, in particular by fostering a space for locals and new arrivals to congeal around technology, and establish a platform for computer-assisted learning; and
3. Take action for the environment by repairing, reusing, and recycling digital equipment.

“The refugees’ situation was the catalyst, but not the only issue we wanted to address,” Patrick emphasized. “We want to ensure that everyone in Luxembourg has a computer and the necessary skills to use it. We are vision-driven, not resource focused; what we provide is a holistic system. Our main goal is to make IT accessible to *everyone*, and help those that are disconnected from the digital society – especially those who are excluded for financially or cultural purposes, including those who cannot use ICTs or afford a computer.”

As the president of the nonprofit, one of Patrick’s first orders of business was to reach out to the community. “I only work about 10-20 hours per week on this, on a volunteer basis too. We have two full-time employees – Anna Szymanska is the project manager, and Aws Alomar, an engineer from Iraq, is the chief technician – and seven other part-time staff members, plus a host of volunteers,” he said. Digital Inclusion is now hiring another four part-timers to assist the newly launched “Digital Inclusion Skillz Academy” project financed by the European Social Fund and the Luxembourg Ministry of Labour.

Most employees are refugees or unemployed Luxembourgers – unemployment is another aspect they are addressing. He also proudly pointed out that of the two full-time employees, one is an engineer, and the other is a sociologist. “Ultimately, we want to address how we can take existing skills and transform them into something beneficial to society,” he said, so it means they have to address both the technological and the social elements of the problem at hand.

The problem became more acute when he learned that even though the government, one of the wealthiest in Europe, provides refugees with free lodging and meals, it only gives them around 25 euros per month in financial support. When talking to refugees, Patrick realized that many Iraqi and Syrian refugees in particular know how to use computers and have digital skills, but did not have access to a PC. “Most of them have a smartphone, but not a PC,” he said – in fact, [smartphones are now indispensable for refugees](#). “Refugees often arrive without a computer,” he continued, “I thought, ‘If someone has time and skills, but no computer, that’s the missing link.’ Smartphones are great, but they have limitations. If someone wants to get a job or look for new opportunities, they need Internet and a computer. If they want to learn things online, like language, or communicate with loved ones and watch the news, they need a computer.”

To their credit, the government has supported in other ways, like installing Internet equipment in the refugee housing complexes and providing access for free. There are still problems, though, like the Internet only being available on the first floor of the complexes, which is a hindrance to many of the residents. As a result, Digital Inclusion began offering free routers that were either recycled or inexpensive to buy. One complex, for instance, was able to extend the Internet up two floors because of the donated equipment. They also contribute to other social projects, and donate computers to camps – they have furnished computer labs in several complexes, for instance.

Patrick made sure to point out that in Luxembourg, salaries are high, but so is cost of living. Thus, repairing and refurbishing computers is expensive. “Companies often toss out the computers after around five-to-six years and buy new ones instead of upgrading them,” he said. Upon

learning this, he asked, “How can I fill that gap?” “While PC sales are stagnating because the differences between generations is narrowing, we want to recycle computers while they are still good – even with just 4 GB [gigabytes] of RAM [random access memory] and other low-tier components, the computers can still do a lot,” he said. “In a society where someone doesn’t have access to a computer, one that is six years old is still better, especially if you don’t have one. It’s a sin to simply throw them away when others could use them, and it cuts down on two big problems: [e-waste](#) and [inequality](#).” And since a 2017 [report](#) from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) found that amount of discarded e-waste in 2016 alone totaled approximately \$55 billion, it is a problem that will likely exacerbate both our environmental and inequality woes going forward.

One of the reasons why companies in Luxembourg discard computers instead of repairing or refurbishing them is because the labor costs are high. Patrick said a technician at a shop in the capital, Luxembourg City, can charge 60-100 euros per hour, even just to do something rather basic, such as reinstalling Windows. Thus, Digital inclusion provides free support to refugees, but also those who need their computers repaired, often employing the existing skills that refugees and other volunteers have. Such shops will not always repair an old screen either, which can severely impact a refugee’s ability to go online, but Digital Inclusion will repair them. Such support, in the words of Patrick, “Gives those who want to do something, something useful to do. We also provide classes and training, such as digital literacy training, and host repair workshops that are open to the public. Additionally, we run a [makerspace](#), workshops where we teach participants to self-learn new languages using computer software, and we organize events for women specifically. We are currently working on a storytelling project as well, which will be published in autumn. There are so many ways to help; the public repair workshops are also a way to increase social inclusion since everyone can participate and help us recycle or refurbish computers to give to those in need. And as one journalist who wrote about us described, ‘The Luxembourgish have too many computers, and the refugees have too much time,’ so it is a perfect fit.

If all of this sounds familiar, it is because Digital Inclusion was modeled on the philosophy of the [circular economy](#). So far, they have recycled more than 1,000 computers, and they need around 300 to 500 more computers to fulfill their goal of connecting all the refugees currently living in Luxembourg as well as those in need among the local population. “It is an essential part of our philosophy that everything we offer to refugees, we offer in the same extent to the local population. People in need also get free computers from us,” Patrick highlighted.

How can you help?

When I asked Patrick how people can help or get involved, he said anyone with old computers can donate them (see the [contribute](#) page on their website). He suggested those interested can [contact](#) them and then ship to Luxembourg, especially if the older devices are laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc. He stressed, however, that it is important to see what is available locally. He suggested they get in touch with the local organizations assisting refugees, such as [Caritas](#), the [Red Cross](#), etc. – those that collect clothes – and ask them if there are other organizations that do this kind of work. Even doing a basic Google search will do – he once goggled such organizations in Germany and found [Refugees Online](#), for instance. [Computer Aid](#) does

similar work in the U.K, while [Techfugees](#) works around the globe to integrate refugees. I even suggested that Digital Inclusion maintain a list of organizations or initiatives doing similar work on their website to operate as a central hub for such resources.

Patrick followed up later and added that in March 2018, Digital Inclusion will start a new exciting circular economy project called iCycle, focused on the collection, repair, and recycling of smartphones and tablets. Partnering with Caritas and also funded by the Oeuvre Nationale de Secours Grande-Duchesse Charlotte, the project’s ambition is to “upcycle” as many smart devices as possible on the Luxembourgish territory while raising awareness about both e-waste and the intrinsic value of the [conflict minerals](#) (minerals deriving from conflict zones) inside these devices – as well as the need to keep them functioning as much as possible.

Immigration is [intrinsically connected](#) to Europe’s future, and technology provides key [solutions](#) will help alleviate its refugee crisis. Given the United Nations’ emphasis on [mobile connectivity](#), the Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs) [inclusion](#) of sustainable consumption and production patterns, as well as the ITU’s work on [reducing e-waste](#), seeing Digital Inclusion promote refugee’s social and digital inclusion in Luxembourg, along with sustainable access, economic development, and the environment, is inspirational. In fact, Patrick underscored that his motivation is to help develop things – take an idea and make it into a reality, specifically one that has a social impact. I hope Patrick’s story can inspire others to use their skills and the resources at hand to make a similar impact on their communities, including the valuable human resources of affected groups that are ripe for inclusion that can foster a positive image of social contribution.

For the latest updates and announcements, check out their Facebook [page](#) and [website](#)

Bio: *Michael J. Oghia is a Belgrade, Serbia-based independent consultant, researcher, & editor working within the Internet governance ecosystem. Twitter: [@mikeoghia](#)*