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Inclusion
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NATIONAL REPORT FOR ALBANIA

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For the publisher
Mirjam Reçi

Author
Marsela Dauti

CSDC support team
Mirjam Reçi
Migena Nako

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AADF	Albanian-American Development Foundation
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AKEP	Electronic and Postal Communications Authority
AKSHI	National Agency for Information Society
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DART	Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDM	Institute for Democracy and Mediation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LGU	Local Government Unit
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MIE	Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy
NCSA	National Cyber Security Authority
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
RUDA	Livestock and Veterinary Information System
SCiDEV	Science and Innovation for Development Centre
SMIP	School Management Information Platform
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WB	World Bank
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework

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1. INTRODUCTION

The national report was created within the framework of the Digital Inclusion Initiative (DII[1]), a regional project implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and funded by the European Commission. The goal of the project is to enhance the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans in advocating for participatory democracies and supporting the EU accession process by strengthening their capacities for policy development and advocacy for digital inclusion. In Albania, we know little about the state of digital exclusion. The report aims to fill the gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of digital inclusion in the country.

The report draws on a combination of data sources, including national policy documents, a regional policy questionnaire, interviews, and focus group discussions. The analysis began with a review of Albania's key national strategies relevant to digital inclusion, such as the Intersectoral Strategy for the Digital Agenda 2022–2026 and the National Broadband Plan 2020–2025. The desk analysis was guided by a regional policy questionnaire used across all countries participating in the DII. The questionnaire included numerous indicators grouped across themes such as access, affordability, digital skills, usability of services, governance, and inclusiveness. Primary data collection was carried out to capture diverse experiences and perspectives related to digital inclusion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts, civil society representatives, government officials,

1 www.diiproject.net

and service providers, while focus group discussions involved older adults, teachers, rural residents, and users of the e-Albania platform.

The findings of the report reveal a fragmented digital inclusion landscape in Albania. While internet access and smartphone use are widespread, significant disparities persist in terms of digital skills, usability of services, and the accessibility of digital platforms for vulnerable groups. Older adults, people with disabilities, rural residents, low-income households, and marginalized communities such as Roma and Egyptian populations face persistent barriers to meaningful participation in digital life. Strategic frameworks acknowledge the importance of digital inclusion but rarely operationalize it or allocate sufficient funding for implementation. Civil society organizations play a critical role in bridging gaps but lack structural support. The findings point to a need for a clearer national framework, better intersectoral coordination, improved data collection, and inclusive design and delivery of services.

The report is organized into eight sections. Following the introduction, Section 2 conceptualizes digital inclusion and situates it within the Albanian policy context. Section 3 provides an overview of the national context, digital access and skills data, the strategic-legislative framework, governance and financing mechanisms, and alignment with EU standards. Section 4 examines the role of key sectors, including education, health, social protection, and civil society, in advancing digital inclusion. Section 5 reviews existing national research and compares it with the findings of this study. Section 6 presents case examples of national practices promoting inclusion. Section 7 outlines the key challenges identified during the research, as well as opportunities for improvement. Finally, Section 8 offers detailed recommendations for improving digital inclusion policies in Albania, both for the general population and for vulnerable groups at risk of exclusion.

2. CONCEPTUALISING DIGITAL INCLUSION

Digital inclusion (alb: përfshirja dixhitale) is not explicitly defined in national legislation. However, its components are articulated across several strategic documents. The Intersectoral Strategy Digital Agenda 2022–2026 and the National Plan for the Sustainable Development of Digital Infrastructure (Broadband) 2020–2025 frame digital inclusion as a combination of broadband access, digital literacy, and reduced digital disparities, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. The emphasis is on infrastructure development, digital skills, and public service delivery through platforms like e-Albania. Vulnerable groups are acknowledged but not precisely or operationally defined. Strategic documents reference rural communities, persons with disabilities, older adults, and low-income households. Meanwhile, interviewees and focus group participants identified the following groups as being at risk of digital exclusion: older adults; persons with disabilities (including individuals with visual, hearing, speech, mobility, and intellectual impairments); rural residents; low-income households; Roma and Egyptian communities; transgender individuals; women and girls; young people outside education or training systems; unemployed individuals; individuals with low education levels; children cared for by older adults; smallholder farmers, particularly older adults, women, and farmers in remote rural areas. The analysis of data suggests that the national understanding of digital inclusion remains narrow, often emphasizing infrastructure over empowerment. This finding was confirmed in an interview with a Digital and Innovation Policy Expert, who emphasized that Albania is undergoing patchy digitalization rather than digital transformation.

3. NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR DIGITAL INCLUSION

3.1 General contextual data

Albania is an upper-middle-income country with a 2023 GDP of €21.9 billion. The average monthly salary is approximately €837.59, while the unemployment rate stands at 8.8% (Q4, 2024), with a significantly higher at-risk-of-poverty rate among the unemployed (39.3%) compared to those employed (10.5%). Around 42.1% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, indicating significant socio-economic challenges. Rural residents make up 35.1% of the population, while 20% of Albanians are over 65 years old, reflecting both rurality and ageing as key factors in digital vulnerability. Educational attainment data shows that 34.8% of people aged 15+ have completed upper-secondary education, while 20.2% have higher education. Notably, 2.3% of the population is illiterate, rising to 7.1% among those over 70 (Instat, 2023a).

While these figures do not directly measure digital skills or access to technology, they provide important context for understanding the structural conditions that shape digital inclusion. Socio-economic status, age, education, and rural residence are closely linked to digital inclusion. Individuals living in poverty are less likely to afford internet services, digital devices, or digital literacy opportunities. Older adults often face greater challenges in adapting to digital technologies (Citizens Channel, 2024). In rural areas, where over one-third of the population resides, infrastructural limitations such as poor connectivity or lack of support services can further restrict access (Rama & Polo, 2023). Together, these structural barriers create the conditions for digital exclusion to persist.

3.2 Data concerning digital skills and habits in using digital technologies

As of 2023, 86.2% of the population uses the internet, with slightly lower usage among women (81.7%) and significantly lower among older people aged 65–74 (52.7%). Smartphone penetration is nearly universal, with 99.8% of individuals accessing the internet via mobile devices. However, when it comes to digital skills, only 34.4% of the population has basic skills, 23.6% intermediate, and 6.5% advanced skills—highlighting a significant skills gap. Data is lacking for subgroups, such as the unemployed, people with less than secondary education, or those at the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. While 53.3% of the general population uses e-government services, there is no official data disaggregated by gender, age, education, or vulnerability, despite the relevance of these indicators in EU-level monitoring.

Table 1. Indicators for monitoring digital inclusion-population[2]

No.	INDICATOR	Population groups					
		Male	Female	Old people (65-74 y.o.)	Education (less than secondary school)	Unemployed people	Total population
1.	% of the population that uses the internet	84.6	81.7	52.7	No official data	No official data	86.2
2.	% of the population that uses e-government services	No official data	No official data	No official data	No official data	No official data	53.3
3.	% of the population that actively uses social media	68.2	62.9	No official data	No official data	No official data	65.5
4.	% of the population with basic, intermediate, and advanced digital skills	No official data	No official data	No official data	No official data	No official data	34.4 23.6 6.5
5.	% of the population that uses smartphones or other mobile devices to access the internet	99.7	99.9	96.5	Noofficial data	No official data	99.8

From household data, 97.1% of households reportedly have internet access. Yet, only 29.2% of individuals use personal computers to go online—pointing to reliance on mobile devices. There is no data on digital habits of households at the poverty threshold, rural/urban distinctions, or access to digital financial services in different regions.

Table 2. Indicators for monitoring digital inclusion-households[3]

No.	INDICATOR	Percentage
1.	% of households with internet access	97.1 (household-level)
2.	% of the population that uses personal computers to access the internet	29.2 (individual-level)
3.	% of the population that uses smartphones to access the internet	99.8 (individual-level)

2 Instat. (2023b). https://www.instat.gov.al/media/12934/ict-2023__.pdf

3 Instat. (2024). https://www.instat.gov.al/media/14621/ict-2024_english.pdf

Field research suggests that these statistics do not fully reflect the reality on the ground. During focus group discussions, e-Albania users revealed that older adults and low-income individuals often rely on intermediaries (e.g., internet cafés or family members) to access digital services, leading to issues with data privacy and reliability of access. These groups often lack the digital skills or tools to use services like e-Albania independently, and they are excluded from statistics that measure meaningful use.

Another insight was that typically people engage with digital technologies for social media, not for accessing services, learning, or activism. During interviews, civil society representatives highlighted the absence of national data on persons with disabilities, Roma and Egyptian communities, and transgender individuals—groups that face multiple barriers but are not visible in official statistics. Interviewees and focus group participants called for more detailed, disaggregated data collection that fully align with EU-level DESI indicators to guide more inclusive policies. Teachers participating in the focus group reported that infrastructure in schools is outdated, and digital skills among educators are uneven. In many cases, teachers use their own internet and equipment, which creates disparities within the education sector. PISA 2022 results show that the number of computers per student in Albania is among the lowest in Europe (OECD, 2025).

3.3 Overview of the relevant strategic-legislative framework

Albania's policy framework for digital development includes a combination of core and complementary strategies, each addressing different dimensions of digitalization. While no single strategy fully articulates a comprehensive digital inclusion agenda, several national documents incorporate relevant components—either through infrastructure expansion, education reforms, or targeted support for vulnerable populations. Below is an overview of key strategic documents.

Core strategies:

- Intersectoral Strategy for the Digital Agenda 2022–2026: Sets out Albania's national vision for digital development, focusing on broadband access, digital governance, and improved public service delivery. Digital inclusion is indirectly addressed through objectives related to infrastructure and user access, but it is not treated as a standalone policy goal.
- National Plan for the Sustainable Development of Digital Infrastructure (Broadband Plan) 2020–2025: Aims to reduce territorial disparities in internet access by expanding high-speed broadband—especially in rural and underserved areas. It promotes infrastructure investment through public-private partnerships, encourages infrastructure sharing among providers, and targets coverage for all households and public institutions.

Complementary strategies with digital inclusion components:

- National Strategy for Social Protection 2024–2030: Integrates digital inclusion, particularly for vulnerable populations. It highlights the need for assistive technologies and removing barriers to digital access.
- National Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance 2023–2030: Acknowledges the importance of strengthening local government units (LGUs) to deliver digital public services.
- Pre-university Education Development Strategy 2021–2026: Includes digital competencies as part of core learning outcomes and calls for the integration of ICT in the classroom.
- Strategy for the Development of Social Enterprises 2021–2026: Foresees digital technology as a tool for increasing the employment and social participation of vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities and youth.
- Cross-cutting Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030: Recognizes the gender gap in access to digital tools and services, calling for empowerment through digital skills.
- National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030 (not published yet): Emphasizes citizen empowerment through education, awareness-raising, and the development of capacity to engage safely with digital technologies.

See Appendix A for the list of strategies.

Interviews and focus group discussions revealed widespread dissatisfaction with how strategies are implemented:

- eAlbania users, especially older adults and rural residents, criticized the sudden closure of physical service counters for civil registry, pension, health, education, and social services. Many reported being unable to access services without intermediaries, leading to increased costs and concerns about data privacy.
- Teachers reported that while digital tools are mentioned in education strategies, practical support is lacking. They often rely on personal resources—such as purchasing projectors or using personal phones to access the internet—lack access to internet (or connect internet through their personal phones), and training programs are not hands-on.
- Health professionals and patients noted the discontinuation of digital health initiatives like telemedicine, and the lack of digital medical prescriptions.
- While Albania has adopted legal frameworks, they are often top-down, fragmented, and not evidence-based. CSOs and vulnerable groups are not accounted for in monitoring and/or policy design.
- Other issues that affect implementation included overlapping mandates across institutions, weak local capacity, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms. The Director of Monitoring and Incident Response at National Cyber Security Authority (NCSA) shared that while NCSA leads important initiatives related to digital safety and awareness, the implementation of strategies depends on actors in education, local governance, and social services—sectors beyond its jurisdiction. For initia-

tives to work effectively, all these actors need to come together and work collaboratively. While discussing the challenges faced by the Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation (DART) programme, the FAO Program Coordinator highlighted the fragmentation of digital systems in agriculture, such as the Farm Register, RUDA, and e-Albania. These systems, she explained, operate in "silos," which limits the efficiency and scalability of digital services for farmers.

3.4 Governance

The National Agency for Information Society (AKSHI), operating under the Prime Minister's Office, is primarily responsible for digitization and digital technologies. AKSHI coordinates the development and administration of state information systems and promotes the Information Society in the country. Additionally, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy (MIE) oversees telecommunications and broadband development, implementing the National Broadband Plan and related policies. The Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP) serves as the regulatory body for electronic communications and postal services, ensuring compliance with national policies.

Albania's strategic-legislative framework established the National Agency for Information Society (AKSHI) in 2007 to oversee digital access and inclusion. In 2017, AKSHI was reorganized to improve its operations and to include broader competencies in the field of information and communication technology. AKSHI coordinates the development and administration of state information systems, promotes the Information Society, and manages the e-Albania portal, facilitating citizen access to electronic public services.

AKSHI is headed by the General Director, supported by a Deputy Director and a Secretary. AKSHI includes a wide range of departments and sectors such as the Internal Audit Sector, the Directorate of Programming and Development, and the Directorate of E-Gov Systems, each with dedicated sector heads and specialists. Other directorates cover areas like E-Gov Infrastructure, Finance and Budget, Human Resources, State Databases, the e-Albania Government Portal, E-Gov Promotion, Data Center & Backup, and Cybersecurity. Each unit typically includes a director, one or more sector heads, and specialists.

3.5 Financing of digital inclusion policies

Albania's strategic and legislative frameworks for digital transformation and inclusion are partially funded, but in many cases the budgets are either broad or not explicitly tied to digital inclusion goals. While documents like the Digital Agenda 2022–2026 and Broadband Plan 2020–2025 have national and donor-supported funding, digital inclusion is not treated as a standalone policy area with its own financial allocation. For example, the Digital Agenda is supported by the state budget and donor contributions, but funds are mostly directed to public service digitization rather than access

and empowerment of vulnerable groups. The National Strategy for Social Protection 2024–2030 is the only framework with clear references to digital inclusion objectives, such as promoting assistive technology and removing access barriers, with financial planning embedded in its implementation framework. The Pre-university Education Strategy 2021–2026 mentions digital literacy, but implementation is often left to donor initiatives or pilot projects rather than consistently funded government programs.

The largest national investments tied to digital inclusion include broadband infrastructure, digital public services, GovTech and cybersecurity capacity, and digital education. A significant investment is committed to the National Broadband Plan (2020–2025), with funding sourced from the state budget, EU IPA funds, and the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). This investment prioritizes rural and underserved areas, aiming to reach EU Gigabit Society targets. Significant investment has also gone into expanding e-Albania, a central platform for digital government services. While the platform enhances access, it has limited built-in accessibility features (e.g., no sign language interpretation, no adapted content for users with disabilities), making its inclusion potential underutilized. The gov tech initiative led by AKSHI includes components for service innovation, digital identity, and security. This initiative has received multi-year funding from the state budget and international donors, including the World Bank and EU IPA. Investments in teacher training, infrastructure, and ICT use in schools are outlined in the Pre-university Education Strategy, but interviews and focus group data indicate that actual school-level funding remains insufficient. Teachers often use personal resources for devices and internet.

In the ICT and public administration sector, there are budget lines for broadband development and e-services, with investments channeled through AKSHI and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. In the social protection sector, targeted programs aim to reduce barriers for people with disabilities, supported by funding under the 2024–2030 strategy for assistive technologies and inclusive service design. The education sector incorporates digital literacy into curricula, with some funding allocated for teacher training and school connectivity; however, implementation varies by municipality. In the cybersecurity sector, initiatives related to cyber hygiene, awareness campaigns, and digital trust are mostly donor-financed and only indirectly linked to digital inclusion.

Key donors and international mechanisms supporting digital inclusion components in Albania include the European Union, which provides funds used to co-finance broadband infrastructure, digitization of public services, and education modernization. The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) is a major co-financer of broadband rollout, particularly in rural regions. The World Bank finances digital governance improvements, especially through gov tech platforms. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) supports small-scale innovation and public-private partnerships related to ICT and digital skills. GIZ (Ger-

many) provides technical assistance and training in digital competencies, especially in vocational education and employment services. The UNDP supports inclusion-oriented projects, such as e-accessibility and local governance digitization. The Albanian-American Development Foundation has introduced an ICT curriculum to elementary education in Albania to help narrow the digital divide in the country.

See Appendix D, Table D1 for more information on funding.

Transparency of funding

Interviewees strongly criticized the lack of public transparency in funding decisions. Currently, there is limited access to information about how and where digital inclusion-related funds are spent. For instance, Albania's investment of $10 million in an AI-related start-up linked to a prominent figure (Mira Murati, former interim chief executive officer of OpenAI) was cited as lacking any clear economic justification, and not being publicly debated. Policy processes are seen as exclusive, with only a narrow circle of insiders involved, rather than an open, consultative approach.

Efficiency of spending

Focus group participants perceived low efficiency and poor value in how digital services are funded and delivered. Older adults and low-income families often pay intermediaries to access e-Albania, suggesting that investment in platforms is not matched by investment in user accessibility or digital literacy. Teachers reported receiving only short, theoretical digital trainings, while schools lacked the necessary infrastructure and maintenance support. Health professionals noted that some digital health initiatives, like telemedicine, were launched and then quietly discontinued, raising concerns about sustainability and follow-through.

Sufficiency of funding

Across all interviewees and focus group participants, there was consensus that digital inclusion is underfunded. Funding tends to prioritize infrastructure and platforms, with insufficient investment in human-centered components, such as support services, training, accessibility features, or local-level implementation. For example, people with disabilities remain excluded due to the absence of assistive technologies and accessible content. Local government units often lack the technical and financial capacity to implement inclusion-related initiatives, despite being key service delivery actors.

3.6 Alignment between selected EU framework and national legislation

The Digital Agenda 2022-2026 prioritizes e-governance and cybersecurity, aligning with EU objectives. However, it lacks explicit focus on solidarity and inclusion as well as AI governance frameworks in line with EU GDPR and AI regulations. The National Plan for Broadband Development 2020–2025 aims to expand high-speed internet access, particularly in rural areas, supporting

SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure). Albania's Education Strategy 2021–2026 incorporates digital competencies but lacks structured certification systems like the European Digital Skills. The gender & digital inclusion aspect highlights that SDG 5 (gender equality) promotes gender-sensitive digital policies. However, the strategies mention gender equality but lack specific funding and targets, resulting in weak gender mainstreaming in digital policies. Regarding the green digital transition, the EU Digital Decade emphasizes sustainability in digital infrastructure, but Albania does not have explicit climate-friendly digital strategies, and there is little focus on digital sustainability.

3.7 Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for relevant policies

The strategic-legislative framework foresees a system for monitoring and evaluating the achievement of targets and strategic goals. The National Agency for Information Society (AKSHI) is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Digital Agenda 2022–2026. A structured monitoring framework includes periodic evaluations through biannual and annual monitoring reports. The framework emphasizes cross-institutional coordination, continuous performance assessment, and public reporting.

The National Plan for Broadband Development 2020–2025 includes a structured system for monitoring and evaluating its implementation. The plan establishes key performance indicators that measure broadband penetration, network coverage, service affordability, and quality. Monitoring is based on periodic reports and statistical indicators, with a focus on tracking broadband expansion in urban and rural areas. Additionally, the framework includes integrated management groups and strategic committees to assess progress and adjust policies accordingly.

The latest monitoring reports highlight progress in digital inclusion but note numerous challenges as well. The reports note a steady increase in internet access across Albania, with broadband expansion focusing on rural and remote areas. However, digital access disparities persist, particularly for low-income households and persons with disabilities. The reports also emphasize efforts to reduce the digital divide by investing in broadband infrastructure and enhancing digital literacy programs. Delays in broadband deployment and gaps in accessibility programs remain key issues. Recommendations include stronger funding mechanisms, targeted accessibility programs, and better inter-institutional collaboration to ensure that vulnerable groups fully benefit from digital transformation initiatives.

Interviewees highlighted that policy implementation is rarely evaluated against outcomes associated with vulnerable groups. Representatives of a civil society organization highlighted that monitoring tends to focus on infrastructure coverage or service availability rather than meaningful access or user empowerment. While annual reports are produced, they do not fully capture the impact of reforms on end users. Moreover, institu-

tional overlaps and a lack of inter-agency coordination weaken the monitoring system.

Focus group participants—especially teachers and rural residents—felt that the disconnect between policies and daily realities is not being detected by formal evaluation mechanisms. Teachers, for instance, pointed to inadequate training initiatives and missing infrastructure that were likely counted as delivered in official statistics. There is no dedicated mechanism to monitor the accessibility or inclusiveness of digital public services such as e-Albania. Vulnerable populations remain underrepresented in both data collection and policy monitoring and evaluation.

4. KEY SECTORS - ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

4.1 Intersectoral cooperation

Intersectoral cooperation is recognized as a critical enabler of digital inclusion in the country. National strategies emphasize the importance of collaboration across ministries, agencies, civil society, and local governments. Cooperation takes several forms, such as joint awareness-raising and capacity-building activities, particularly with educators, youth, and local officials; community-based outreach through civil society organizations and local actors; coordinated cyber incident simulations and institutional vulnerability assessments. Examples of cooperation exist. Civil society initiatives, such as community-based digital skills training and inclusive awareness campaigns, have been effective when implemented in collaboration with local governments and national agencies. However, these tend to be limited, project-based efforts.

The representative from the National Agency for Information Society elaborated on intersectoral cooperation, stating that her institution works closely with public institutions, CSOs, and local governments to carry out training and awareness programs, particularly in rural and underserved areas. However, she also acknowledged persistent challenges, including overlapping institutional mandates, fragmented resource allocation, and weak inter-agency data sharing mechanisms. Further, she emphasized that Albania currently lacks a formal national coordination mechanism—such as an interministerial working group or digital inclusion task force—that could consolidate efforts and track shared progress. She recommended the establishment of such a platform to improve strategic alignment, reduce duplication, and enhance policy coherence.

The representative of the Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation (DART) Programme highlighted persistent coordination challenges among governmental agencies, especially between the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the National Agency for Information Society (AKSHI), and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. Fragmented data systems, such as the Rural Development Agency's RUDA platform, the Farm Register, and the national e-Albania portal, and delays in formal integration have hindered progress. This illustrates how even well-designed programmes face administrative bottlenecks and interoperability challenges when intersectoral cooperation is weak.

4.2 Contribution of different sectors

Telecommunications and state administration

Digitalization has progressed most significantly in the telecommunications and state administration sectors. The broadband infrastructure has expanded, especially in rural areas, contributing to near-universal internet access—primarily through smartphones. In parallel, the

state administration offers over 1,200 digital public services through the e-Albania platform. These advances have streamlined administrative procedures and made many services more accessible to the general population. However, issues remain in terms of usability, inclusiveness, and accessibility for groups such as older adults, persons with disabilities, and residents of remote areas, who often lack the digital skills or support to engage with these services independently.

Education and research/innovation

In education, the integration of digital competencies into the school curriculum reflects progress at the policy level. Tools such as SMIP, Canvas, and Kahoot!, are in use. Nevertheless, practical implementation is inconsistent. Focus group participants highlighted ongoing problems such as insufficient devices, poor internet connectivity in schools, and overreliance on teachers' personal resources. Training provided to teachers has been criticized as overly theoretical and lacking in hands-on, practical content. The research and innovation sector, while included in strategic planning, has advanced mostly through donor-funded projects. Investment in inclusive and scalable digital research infrastructure remains limited.

Health and social welfare

Digitalization in the health and social welfare sectors is less developed and marked by inconsistency. In the health sector, telemedicine services were piloted in facilities such as the Durrës hospital but have since been discontinued. Pharmacists have long urged the government to introduce digital medical prescriptions, but so far, the proposal has remained only on paper. In social welfare, some services like applications for pension or orphan status have shifted online through e-Albania, yet many users—particularly the older adults and those in rural areas—lack the means to access these services independently. As a result, they often turn to paid intermediaries, raising both financial and data protection concerns. The transition away from in-person counters has created further barriers for these groups, who are now excluded from essential welfare services unless supported by others.

Financial services

Digitalization in financial services has progressed at a moderate pace. There is growing use of mobile banking and digital payment tools, and the introduction of digital identity and electronic signature systems has helped secure online transactions. However, there is a lack of disaggregated data to assess the inclusiveness of these services, particularly among low-income users, rural residents, and older populations. While the financial sector appears to be adapting to digital technologies, it remains unclear how far these benefits extend across all demographics.

Interviewees and focus group participants recognized some progress in the availability of digital public services, particularly through the e-Albania platform and mobile-based access to government documents, education, and health-related applications. However, they

emphasized that **access to services is not equivalent to meaningful inclusion**. One of the most common challenges mentioned is **digital literacy**. Focus group discussions revealed that older adults cannot navigate platforms like e-Albania without assistance. Instead, they depend on family members or paid intermediaries to perform even the most basic tasks, such as downloading certificates or applying for welfare support. Some focus group participants reported paying fees multiple times for unsuccessful or repeated applications.

People with disabilities face particularly acute barriers. Platforms and public services are not designed with accessibility in mind. There is a lack of assistive technology in Albanian, no screen-reader compatibility, and no options for simplified content or sign language. As a result, visually impaired and hearing-impaired individuals are **systematically excluded** from online services, despite being among those who would benefit most from digital access.

Roma and Egyptian communities, transgender persons, and people with low levels of education or living in rural areas are frequently left out of digital policy design and benefit little from digital services. Many are unfamiliar with available services or unable to afford the devices, internet, or support necessary to access them. Youth outside education or employment systems are also at risk. Farmers lack the skills and infrastructure to benefit from digital services. Digital illiteracy among farmers and poor connectivity in rural areas remain among the main challenges.

Teachers participating in focus groups emphasized that **digital education is unevenly implemented**, often depending on individual teachers' initiative. In schools with fewer resources, students from low-income families are more likely to fall behind due to lack of access to devices or support at home. Health professionals rely on their phones, using WhatsApp to offer health advice.

Across all groups, a major complaint was the lack of public information and user support. Users do not know where to turn for assistance or how to report problems.

The *public administration sector* has made the most significant investment in digitalization. Significant resources have been invested in expanding the e-Albania platform and improving national digital infrastructure. While initiatives often focus on access and efficiency, they also indirectly benefit inclusion by expanding basic digital service coverage and integrating cybersecurity awareness for various target groups. The *education sector* has also made contribution by incorporating digital competencies into school curricula. The Pre-University Education Development Strategy 2021–2026 emphasizes the importance of digital literacy. Although implementation is uneven and constrained by lack of infrastructure and training, as confirmed by teachers in focus groups, the sector nonetheless recognizes digital skills as essential for future development. The *social protection sector* stands out as the only one to explicitly include digital inclusion goals in its national strategy. The Social Protection Strategy 2024–2030 highlights the need for accessible services for vulnerable groups,

including through assistive technologies and simplified administrative procedures. The sector's formal recognition of digital inclusion and its role in reducing social exclusion is a positive step. The *cybersecurity sector,* while not traditionally linked to inclusion, has contributed through awareness-raising campaigns, training programs, and incident response initiatives aimed at building safe and resilient use of digital tools, particularly for youth, public servants, and underserved communities. As noted in the interview with the representative of this sector, these efforts include intersectoral collaboration with local actors and CSOs to reach marginalized populations. In contrast, *the sector of health* has made less structured or sustained contributions. It is not adapted to the needs of vulnerable groups, and there is little evidence of strategic planning around digital inclusion.

The *education sector*, while including digital competencies in its curriculum, lacks practical, widespread teacher training and adequate infrastructure. Teachers reported during focus groups that training sessions were too theoretical and not tailored to real classroom needs. Schools often lack equipment, internet access, and IT support, particularly in rural areas. This creates significant disparities in digital education delivery and limits students' and teachers' ability to engage with digital tools in meaningful ways. The *health sector* suffers from a lack of clear digital procedures and accessibility for both professionals and patients. The lack of digital prescriptions illustrates missed opportunities for inclusion. In *financial services*, while digital platforms exist, there are no known targeted efforts to ensure access or usability for people with low incomes, low literacy levels, or disabilities. There is no available data on the inclusion of vulnerable groups. The *research and innovation sector* has limited investment in inclusive or assistive digital technologies. Most innovation is donor-driven, with few sustainable or scaled-up examples of research initiatives focused on bridging the digital divide or responding to the needs of excluded groups. The *cybersecurity sector* has implemented awareness-raising and capacity-building campaigns that target both public officials and youth. These efforts, though limited in reach, represent a proactive approach to building digital confidence and safety—critical elements of inclusion. The *social protection sector* is also a good example in terms of policy intent. The National Strategy for Social Protection 2024–2030 is the only strategic document to explicitly address digital inclusion for vulnerable groups. It outlines objectives for removing digital barriers, introducing assistive technologies, and simplifying access to welfare services.

Desk and field research did not identify any evidence of sector-specific incentives supporting digital inclusion policies. Most existing efforts rely on broad strategies or donor support, rather than institutional mechanisms that motivate actors—such as schools, employers, researchers, or municipalities—to adopt inclusive digital practices.

Data on specific sectors are presented in following table:

Sector	Are there digital services, if yes which?	Is there monitoring of quality and satisfaction with these services? (Y/N)	Are there special services for vulnerable groups, if yes which?	Are there identified barriers for vulnerable groups related to digital services, if yes which?
Education	Yes – SMIP platform (grades, attendance), Canvas, Kahoot!.	No	Not specifically.	Lack of devices and internet, limited teacher training, inaccessible content for students with disabilities, digital gap between urban and rural schools.
Telecommunications	Yes – mobile internet (99.8% use), broadband access via state and private providers.	Yes	No specific packages or subsidies for vulnerable groups.	Affordability of services and devices, poor infrastructure in some rural/remote areas.
Health	Partially – some services through e-Albania (e.g., insurance status), telemedicine (discontinued).	No	No targeted services; telemedicine pilots were temporary.	Discontinued services, lack of digital literacy among older adults, inaccessibility for people with disabilities, lack of digital medical prescription.
Financial services	Yes – mobile banking, digital payments, e-signature.	Yes	None identified.	Limited access for low-income and rural populations, no accessibility adaptations, digital trust issues.
Social welfare	Yes – e-Albania services for pension, orphan status, disability payments.	No	No targeted interface.	Reliance on intermediaries by elderly and people with disabilities, lack of accessible platforms, digital illiteracy, insufficient outreach.
Research & Innovation	Limited – mostly donor-funded digital research projects.	No	Not identified.	Lack of national funding for inclusive digital innovation, limited focus on assistive tech, lack of structured support for vulnerable researchers or users.
Administration	Yes – over 1,200 e-Albania services (civil registry, business, licensing).	No	No special user pathways or adaptations for vulnerable groups.	Lack of accessible design, overreliance on digital-only services, closure of physical counters, reliance on paid intermediaries by digitally excluded populations.

4.3 Role of the civil society sector (CSO) and CSO-led initiatives

CSOs contribute to digital inclusion through initiatives focused on digital literacy, civic engagement, the promotion of digital rights, and access to e-Albania. Organizations such as SCiDEV,[4] Epoka e Re Youth Centre,[5] the National Resource Centre for Civil Society,[6] and the Institute for Democracy and Mediation[7] have organized workshops, training programs, and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at enhancing digital skills, particularly among youth, marginalized groups, and CSO actors themselves. Walk in My Shoes[8] organization offers direct support with e-Albania services, especially to Roma and Egyptian families. The service is offered in in Shkodra, Cërrik, Shushica, Pojan, Libonik, Korça, Roskovec, and Puka.

During interviews, representatives of civil society organizations discussed the following issues: First, digital inclusion is not clearly defined or treated as a standalone objective in the main strategic frameworks. Inclusion tends to be addressed only indirectly or implicitly, rather than through explicit commitments, targets, or budget lines. The needs of vulnerable groups—such as people with disabilities, older adults, Roma and Egyptian communities, and rural residents—are not systematically integrated into planning or implementation. Second, the top-down nature of digital governance in Albania is concerning. Policies are developed and implemented with minimal community consultation or CSO involvement, despite the fact that civil society organizations often have the most direct contact with underserved populations. This lack of participatory design results in services that may be technically functional but inaccessible to many users. Third, there is a lack of transparency and public debate around how digital projects are prioritized and financed. They specifically mentioned the example of the Albanian government's investment in an artificial intelligence start-up, arguing that such decisions lack public justification and do not clearly respond to the country's most urgent inclusion needs. Finally, there is a lack of meaningful monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, particularly when it comes to assessing the real-world usability and inclusiveness of platforms like e-Albania. The state measures the number and availability of services, but not whether people can actually use them independently and safely.

Representatives of civil society organizations highlighted advocacy as a central CSO function. They viewed civil society as uniquely positioned to monitor policy, hold institutions accountable, and raise awareness about the risks of digital exclusion. They can advocate for

4 Science and Innovation for Development Center, https://scidevcenter.org/

5 https://www.facebook.com/qendraepokaere/?locale=sq_AL

6 https://resourcecentre.al/

7 https://idmalbania.org/

8 https://vishkepucetemia.wordpress.com/

stronger community representation in policymaking processes and call for the inclusion of equity indicators, accessibility standards, and social impact assessments in digital development plans. Representatives of civil society organizations also viewed CSOs as important in supporting communities directly, especially in reaching those who are excluded from digital services. They pointed out that civil society organizations often serve as intermediaries for people who cannot navigate digital systems independently—not only assisting them with access, but also informing them about their rights. They emphasized the role of CSOs in education and digital skills development, especially for groups that are underserved by formal education systems. CSOs design and deliver community-based training programs that go beyond technical skills to include digital rights, online safety, and civic participation in digital environments. These training programs are seen as adaptable, hands-on, and accessible.

4.4 General conclusion on intersectoral cooperation

Intersectoral cooperation on digital inclusion in Albania has made some progress but remains limited and fragmented. Institutional engagement across sectors—such as cybersecurity, education, and public administration—has increased, particularly around shared goals like digital safety and infrastructure development. However, overlapping mandates, fragmented resources, and weak inter-agency coordination continue to pose challenges. The absence of a formal coordination mechanism prevents consistent alignment of efforts across sectors. Overall, intersectoral cooperation is recognized as essential for advancing digital inclusion, but it requires stronger commitment. It was recommended that a task force or working group on digital inclusion be established.

5. RELEVANT RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

5.1 Overview of research findings

Research highlights several key factors contributing to digital exclusion, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups. Socioeconomic inequalities play a major role, as low-income individuals struggle to afford digital devices or stable internet access, hindering their participation in digital services (Citizens Channel, 2024). Educational attainment also strongly influences digital engagement; those with lower levels of education often lack the skills necessary to navigate digital platforms effectively (Rama & Polo, 2023). Geographical disparities further exacerbate digital exclusion. Rural and remote areas face significant infrastructural barriers, with limited broadband coverage and insufficient access to digital services. Older adults emerge as another vulnerable group, as many struggle with adopting new technologies due to generational digital divides and low digital literacy (Citizens Channel, 2024). Persons with disabilities face additional exclusion due to the lack of accessible design in many digital platforms. Insufficient accommodations such as screen readers or sign language support restrict their ability to access e-services independently (UNDP, 2024).

The launch of e-Albania, providing more than 1,200 public services online, has simplified citizen-state interactions and increased service accessibility. Investments in ICT infrastructure have also played an important role, particularly in education. Research further emphasizes the positive impact of integrating digital tools and accessibility features in learning environments, contributing to increased engagement and academic performance (Osmani & Tartari, 2024). Additionally, public-private partnerships, such as the UN-supported Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation (DART) program, demonstrate how targeted initiatives support vulnerable groups like smallholder farmers by improving their digital capacities.

The European Commission's 2024 Progress Report acknowledges Albania's achievements, notably the expansion of the e-Albania portal. However, the report stresses that digital literacy gaps and limited digital access, particularly for Roma, Egyptian, and rural communities, hinder equitable inclusion (European Commission, 2024). National action plans, such as the Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of Roma and Egyptians 2021–2025, aim to improve access to digital services. Yet, implementation remains weak, with marginalized groups continuing to face barriers in accessing e-services (European Commission, 2024).

5.2 Summary of research findings

Equality of access and digital skills

Access to the internet and digital technologies in Albania is highly unequal, both between urban and ru-

ral areas and among different socioeconomic groups. For example, rural areas, have only 3.4% internet connectivity, with fixed broadband penetration at a mere 2%, compared to 12% in urban areas (National Plan for the Sustainable Development of Digital Infrastructure 2020–2025, pp. 15–16). Additionally, older adults, persons with disabilities, and individuals with lower education levels face serious access and skill barriers (Rama & Polo, 2023). These findings are fully consistent with interview and focus group data. Participants repeatedly emphasized the inability of older adults to navigate e-Albania, and described how they often depend on intermediaries, sometimes paying multiple times for a single service. Educators described how students from low-income households or rural communities face disadvantages due to lack of internet, devices, or support. Interviewees and focus group participants in the health and education sectors echoed that access gaps are structural, and that infrastructure alone doesn't guarantee inclusion.

Training initiatives and the role of education

There is a growing number of digital literacy programs, but they are insufficient, particularly for vulnerable groups. There are major challenges in education, particularly the need for investment in digital infrastructure and better teacher training (UNESCO, 2017). Again, this is strongly confirmed by field research. Teachers in focus groups reported that while digital skills are part of the curriculum, actual implementation is uneven, and many schools rely on teachers' personal devices and internet. Training sessions are described as short, theoretical, and ineffective. CSOs reiterated the importance of sustained, community-based digital education, especially among older adults and marginalized communities, and highlighted the lack of accessible educational content and methodologies.

Trust in technology and use of digital services

There are significant concerns among citizens about privacy and data security, which undermines trust and limits use of digital tools. The lack of trust in institutions and fear of personal data misuse discourage many from using platforms like e-Albania (IDM, 2023; SCiDEV, 2023). This concern was echoed in interviews and focus groups. Participants across multiple groups reported being hesitant to use digital platforms due to lack of clarity about data protection, and many preferred face-to-face services when available. The issue was especially salient among older adults, health service users, and teachers who raised questions about student data security.

See Appendix D, Table D2 for the summary of research findings.

6. EXAMPLES OF NATIONAL PRACTICES

e-Albania Corner, Walk in My Shoes

In 2023, the team from the organization Walk in My Shoes observed that members of the Roma and Egyptian communities were unable to access the e-Albania platform independently. Community members would go to internet centers to use the service, but would often forget their login credentials afterward. In some cases, individuals took advantage of them by blocking their accounts and demanding a payment of 500 lek (around 5 euros) to unblock them. The e-Albania Corner project is provided in the following areas: Shkodra, Cërrik, Shushica, Pojan, Libonik, Korça, Roskovec, and Puka. The e-Albania corner is integrated within the premises of the after-school program and operates three times a week. The team conducted an information campaign in the community by distributing leaflets door-to-door and placing posters in visible community spaces. So far, approximately 600 e-Albania accounts have been created, and around 1,500 documents have been downloaded. These include documents related to school registration for children, housing documents, home ownership certificates, pension applications, and passport and ID applications. About 30% of the cases assisted are not from the Roma or Egyptian communities. The initiative was launched in 2023 and is currently ongoing.

Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation (DART)

The Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation (DART) Programme is a national initiative aimed at promoting inclusive digitalization in Albania's agricultural sector. Launched in 2024, it is co-implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). The programme focuses on three key objectives: developing a National Digital Agriculture Strategy; enhancing the Farmers' Portal to ensure it offers inclusive and accessible services; and delivering targeted digital skills training to farmers, public officials, and vocational education students. Grounded in participatory design, DART incorporates surveys, interviews, and workshops to tailor interventions to user needs and aligns its efforts with European Union standards for rural digital transformation. DART is a three-year program running from 2024 to 2027.

ElementIT

ElementIT project, initiated by the Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF) in collaboration with the government, introduces an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) curriculum to elementary education. In its pilot phase, ElementIT is being implemented in 100 elementary schools across Albania, with plans to expand to 1,100 schools nationwide. The project began in 2021 and is currently ongoing.

While the e-Albania platform has significantly expanded the provision of e-services, a closer look reveals several issues. The rapid transition to mandatory digital-only public services—accompanied by the closure of physical service counters—left many citizens unprepared and unsupported during the shift (People's Advocate, 2023). In practice, many Albanians now rely on private service providers to access e-Albania on their behalf. Citizens frequently pay intermediaries to navigate the system, a hidden expense not reflected in official government reporting. Furthermore, the reliance on third parties raises serious concerns about data privacy and security, as private providers gain access to citizens' personal information. Citizens report delays or a lack of responses from institutions, leaving them helpless and unable to resolve administrative issues. The lack of clear recourse or complaint mechanisms undermines trust in the digital system and widens the gap between the government's digital ambitions and citizens' experiences (Vision Consulting Albania, 2020).

A recurring concern raised by participants across focus groups and interviews was the lack of accessibility of e-Albania for people with disabilities. During the interview, the Head of the Institute for Blind Students described how, "For blind users, there is no vocal synthesis in Albanian, no screen reader compatibility. The platform is simply not usable." These accessibility gaps effectively exclude users with visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments from Albania's main digital public service portal. Many focus group participants, especially older adults and rural residents, expressed difficulty using the platform and reported being dependent on others to access essential services. An older adult shared, "I don't know how to use it [e-Albania]. I go to the internet café, and they do it for me. Sometimes I pay twice because I didn't understand what went wrong the first time." One interviewee noted that the delivery of e-Albania services through internet centers has led to exploitative practices. There are instances of providers who intentionally block users' accounts and demand a payment of 500 lek (approximately 5 euros) to unlock them.

Concerns about data privacy and trust in digital transactions were also prominent. Many users expressed anxiety over having to share personal information with third parties to access services. As one focus group participant explained, "You have to give someone your password, your ID… and hope they won't use it for something else. There's no security in that." This issue is especially pressing in communities where digital literacy is low.

Another major point of frustration was the closure of physical service counters, which many users felt was implemented too quickly. A focus group participant criticized this abrupt transition in the following way: "They closed the counters too quickly. Not everyone is ready for digital services. Now people go to cafés or to their neighbors for help with government documents." Without hybrid options or transitional support, many users have been left behind by the digital shift.

Finally, many expressed frustration over the absence of any structured help or support system. A health professional stated: "There's no place to ask a question or get help. If it doesn't work, you're stuck." Similarly, a teacher said: "There should be someone to help you understand it, not just leave people to figure it out on their own."

7. KEY CHALLENGES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

7.1 Challenges in ensuring digital inclusion

Digital literacy and reliance on intermediaries

A major barrier is low digital literacy, especially among older adults, people with low education levels, and rural residents. Focus group participants reported depending on family members or internet cafés to access digital services, often at a cost. This reliance not only creates hidden expenses but also raises serious data privacy concerns, as users are forced to share personal credentials with third parties.

Accessibility limitations

People with disabilities face significant exclusion due to the lack of assistive technologies and accessible platforms. Interviews revealed the absence of screen readers in Albanian, lack of sign language interpretation, and no simplified content for users with intellectual disabilities. These issues prevent independent access to digital tools and services, even for critical needs like healthcare or education. Farmers—especially those who are older, women, or living in remote areas—face systemic barriers including low digital literacy, insufficient internet coverage, and fragmented agricultural databases.

Uneven implementation in education

While digital competencies are formally included in curricula, practical application faces serious concerns. Teachers frequently reported using their own money to purchase projectors or rely on personal internet connections. Training programs were described as theoretical and ineffective, lacking hands-on learning. Schools in rural areas are particularly under-equipped, widening the digital divide for students from low-income families.

Interruption of digital health initiatives

Digital health services like telemedicine and electronic prescriptions remain underdeveloped. Pilot initiatives were either discontinued or limited in scope, and many professionals still rely on handwritten notes and informal communication tools like WhatsApp. Patients—especially those in remote areas—do not have consistent digital access to healthcare.

Top-down policymaking

Interviewees consistently highlighted the lack of inclusive, participatory processes in digital policy development. Strategic frameworks often do not involve or consult the very communities they aim to serve. As a result, policies tend to reflect institutional priorities rather than lived realities on the ground.

Underfunding and poor resource allocation

Despite large-scale investments in infrastructure, funding for user support, accessibility, and training remains

insufficient. Local government units, often responsible for implementation, lack the financial and technical capacity to carry out digital inclusion measures effectively.

Lack of transparency and monitoring

There is minimal transparency around how funds for digital inclusion are allocated or spent. Monitoring mechanisms focus on infrastructure coverage or service availability, rather than user experience or accessibility. Consequently, vulnerable groups remain invisible in both data and policy outcomes.

Absence of support systems

Users across all focus groups expressed frustration with the lack of structured support. There is no accessible help desk or complaint mechanism to assist users struggling with digital services, especially for those without strong digital skills.

7.2 Areas for improvement

To address the current challenges and bridge the digital divide in Albania, several priority areas for improvement emerge from the data, interviews, and focus group discussions.

Develop a national definition and framework for digital inclusion

Digital inclusion is not currently defined in Albanian law or policy as a standalone concept. A clear, operational definition—aligned with EU standards—should be adopted to guide inclusive policies, funding allocation, and program design.

Ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities

Digital platforms and services must meet international accessibility standards. This includes integrating screen reader compatibility in Albanian, sign language interpretation, and simplified content formats. Laws and regulations should mandate inclusive design and provide funding for the development and procurement of assistive technologies.

Invest in digital skills and human support systems

A stronger emphasis on hands-on, inclusive digital skills training is essential. Programs should be tailored for vulnerable groups such as older adults, persons with disabilities, low-income families, and farmers. Support systems—such as free community-based digital help centers—should be developed to assist users and reduce dependence on paid intermediaries.

Reinstate and improve hybrid service delivery

The closure of physical service counters has excluded users who lack the skills or resources to access online platforms. A hybrid model that maintains some in-person service options, especially in rural areas and for priority populations, would ensure more equitable access to essential services.

Strengthen intersectoral coordination and local capacity

Institutional fragmentation has limited the impact of existing initiatives. A formal coordination mechanism, such as a national digital inclusion working group, is needed to align strategies across sectors. Local government units, which are central to service delivery, should receive dedicated funding and technical support to implement inclusive digital initiatives.

Improve data collection and monitoring

There is an urgent need for timely, disaggregated data on digital access, skills, and use—especially among vulnerable populations. Monitoring systems should track not only infrastructure rollout and service availability but also accessibility, usability, and user satisfaction. This would allow for evidence-based decision making and more targeted interventions.

Promote transparency and participatory decision making

Public debate and community engagement must be prioritized in digital governance. Policies and investments should be discussed transparently, with input from civil society organizations and affected communities. This would improve both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of digital inclusion strategies.

Expand inclusive practices in health, education, and financial services

Sectors such as health have been slow to adopt inclusive digital practices. Introducing electronic medical records, accessible e-prescriptions, and inclusive digital banking tools would significantly enhance service reach. In education, infrastructure and teacher training must be scaled and improved to make digital learning accessible to all students.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY IMPROVEMENT

8.1 Recommendations concerning all general population

To promote equitable digital access and participation across the entire population, the following recommendations are proposed:

Adopt a national digital inclusion framework

The government should develop and adopt a unified framework that defines digital inclusion in line with EU standards. This framework should include goals, indicators, and accountability mechanisms that ensure inclusion is considered across all digital transformation efforts—not just infrastructure or public service delivery.

Expand digital literacy programs nationwide

Comprehensive, continuous digital literacy initiatives should be developed for the general population. These should go beyond basic skills to include digital rights, data protection, cybersecurity awareness, and responsible use of technology. Partnerships with educational institutions, libraries, CSOs, and local governments can facilitate delivery.

Improve usability and accessibility of public digital services

Public platforms such as e-Albania should be designed to be user-friendly for all, including those with low digital skills. Simplifying navigation, providing instructions in plain language, and integrating human support (via phone or local help centers) can greatly improve accessibility and reduce dependence on intermediaries. To enhance accessibility, additional instructional videos should be made available to help users navigate the various services offered on e-Albania.

Reinstate hybrid service options

Ensure that in-person public services are available alongside digital platforms, at least during a transitional phase. This hybrid model will support those not yet fully able to navigate digital systems and foster greater trust in the digital transition process. Services should be provided free of charge by municipalities, administrative units, and community centers.

Increase transparency and accountability in digital governance

Public communication and citizen engagement should become core principles of digital transformation. This includes publishing impact assessments, budget allocations, and implementation progress in a clear and accessible way. National campaigns should also promote public awareness of available services and digital rights.

Strengthen infrastructure and ensure service quality

While broadband coverage has expanded, service quality remains uneven, especially in rural areas. The government should invest in enhancing connectivi-

ty speed, reliability, and affordability across regions to close remaining gaps in internet access.

Institutionalize digital education across the life cycle

Digital education should be a core component of learning from early childhood through adult education. Schools, vocational centers, and lifelong learning programs should be equipped and supported to teach not only technical skills, but also critical thinking and ethical engagement in digital environments.

8.2 Recommendations relating to vulnerable groups at risk of digital exclusion

Based on evidence from interviews, focus groups, and national data, the following recommendations address the specific needs of vulnerable groups at risk of digital exclusion:

Improve accessibility of digital platforms and tools

Improving the accessibility of digital platforms and tools is essential, as many vulnerable groups are excluded due to services not being designed with their needs in mind. For persons with disabilities—including those with visual, hearing, mobility, and intellectual impairments—digital platforms should meet international accessibility standards by incorporating features such as screen reader compatibility in Albanian, voice synthesis, sign language interpretation, and simplified content. Older adults would benefit from age-friendly design elements, including larger text, intuitive interfaces, and audio guides. Meanwhile, individuals with low levels of education require content presented in simplified language and visual formats to ensure clarity and comprehension. Making these adjustments would create more inclusive digital environments and significantly expand access to essential services.

Strengthen community-based digital skills training and support

Strengthening community-based digital skills training and support is critical, as lack of digital literacy remains a central barrier for nearly all vulnerable groups. For older adults, low-income households, unemployed individuals, and people with low levels of education, hands-on, local training sessions should be provided using simple language and supported by follow-up guidance to reinforce learning. Persons with disabilities require tailored instruction on assistive technologies and accessibility tools to ensure independent use of digital services. Roma and Egyptian communities, along with transgender individuals, would benefit from culturally sensitive, in-language training programs implemented through grassroots and community organizations that understand their specific contexts. NEET youth—those not in employment, education, or training—should be offered customized digital upskilling opportunities linked to job readiness or entrepreneurship. Additionally, for children living in vulnerable households, digital

literacy efforts should include family-focused sessions that empower caregivers, particularly older adults, to support children's access and learning. These targeted interventions would help bridge digital gaps and foster broader participation.

Expand access to affordable devices and internet connectivity

Expanding access to affordable devices and internet connectivity is essential, as affordability continues to be a major structural barrier for many vulnerable groups. Low-income households and rural residents would benefit from targeted voucher schemes that subsidize the cost of devices and data plans, helping to reduce the economic burden of digital access. For Roma and Egyptian communities, older adults, and students attending under-resourced schools, establishing free public internet access points—such as in libraries and community centers—would provide crucial entry points to online services and learning opportunities. Additionally, for children cared for by elderly relatives, equipping schools with shared digital devices and extending support to caregivers would ensure continuity in education and enable greater intergenerational support for digital engagement.

Reinstate and support hybrid access to services

Reinstating and supporting hybrid access to public services is crucial, as an overreliance on digital-only systems disproportionately affects individuals who cannot navigate them independently. Older adults, persons with disabilities, and residents of rural areas are particularly vulnerable and would benefit from the reintroduction of in-person or assisted service options, such as help desks and mobile support teams. For all vulnerable groups, establishing local digital kiosks that offer face-to-face assistance can ensure inclusive access while simultaneously building users' capacity to engage with digital platforms over time. A hybrid model facilitates a more gradual and supported digital transition for those who need it most.

Embed digital inclusion in sectoral strategies and service delivery

Embedding digital inclusion into sectoral strategies and service delivery is essential to ensuring equitable access across all aspects of public life. In the health sector, measures such as implementing accessible electronic prescriptions, restoring inclusive telemedicine services, and creating comprehensive electronic patient records would particularly benefit older adults, persons with disabilities, and residents of rural areas. Within the education sector, schools must be equipped with adequate digital infrastructure, teachers trained in inclusive digital pedagogy, and learning tools adapted to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Employment services should integrate digital literacy into vocational training, particularly for unemployed individuals and NEET youth, while also ensuring job portals and digital platforms are user-friendly and accessible. In financial services, mobile banking and e-payment systems should be designed with inclusion in mind, especially

to accommodate older adults, rural populations, and low-income users. Mainstreaming digital inclusion in these sectors will help close persistent access gaps.

Strengthen data collection and monitoring systems

Inclusive policymaking depends on inclusive, disaggregated data. The government should collect and regularly update data on digital access, use, and skills across all vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities, older adults, low-income households, rural residents, Roma and Egyptian communities, transgender individuals, unemployed and low-educated individuals, youth outside education or training, and children in vulnerable households. These data should inform the design and evaluation of policies, and be used to track progress.

Ensure representation in policymaking processes

Beyond data, meaningful representation is essential to shaping responsive and equitable digital policies. Civil society organizations, grassroots groups, and individuals from vulnerable communities should be actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of digital inclusion initiatives. Their experiences offer critical insights into barriers and solutions that may not be visible through quantitative data alone.

ANNEX A:
NATIONAL STRATEGIES

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*Note: The National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030 is currently being discussed.

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ANNEX C: FIELD DATA

Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups

Three focus groups were conducted on May 7 and 8, 2025, to explore digital inclusion experiences among different community groups. The first focus group took place on May 7 at the Multifunctional Center in Rrashbull and brought together eight residents from Rrashbull and Xhafzotaj. The group consisted of three men and five women, with an average age of approximately 50 years, and focused on the use of the e-Albania platform. The second focus group was held on May 8 at the Civil Society for Development Center in Durrës and involved eight teachers from primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools (four women and four men), with an average age of 45 years (ranging from 30 to 62). On the same day and at the same location, the third focus group included six participants—five women and one man—with a professional mix of a pharmacist, doctor, teacher, and three students. This group had an average age of 37 years (ranging from 22 to 59) and brought together healthcare professionals and service users to discuss digital access and healthcare technologies.

Interviews

A series of interviews were conducted throughout May 2025 with representatives from key institutions engaged in digital inclusion. On May 13, two representatives from the Science and Innovation for Development Center (SCiDEV) were interviewed virtually. This was followed by a written interview on May 16 with a representative from the National Agency for Information Society. On May 21, a written interview was conducted with a representative of the Institute for Blind Students. Further insights were gathered on May 29 through a virtual interview with a representative of Walk in My Shoes, an organization focused on Roma education. Finally, on May 30, a representative from the Food and Agriculture Organization responded to the interview in writing. Interviewees held the following positions: Digital and Innovation Policy Expert (SCiDEV); Project Coordinator (SCiDEV); Director of Monitoring and Incident Response (National Cyber Security Authority); Executive Director (Institute for Blind Students, Walk in My Shoes); and National Program Coordinator (FAO).

ANNEX D:
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT FUNDING AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table D1

Mapping available funding

Funding Source	Beneficiary	Description of objectives	Digital inclusion	Overall budget (EUR)	Dedicated Digital inclusion budget (EUR)
State budget (Intersectoral Strategy Digital Agenda 2022–2026, Digital Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities)	Persons with disabilities	Ensure digital accessibility by adapting government portals and websites for persons with disabilities	Improve e-government service accessibility	Unclear	1,700,000 EUR (187,500,000 ALL)
State budget, Public-Private Partnerships (Intersectoral Strategy Digital Agenda 2022–2026, Digital Literacy in Schools)	Students and teachers	Implement a digital skills strategy to enhance ICT education	Provide digital literacy training and equip schools with smart labs	Unclear	23,450,000 EUR (2,500,000,000 ALL)
EU funds, Public-Private Partnerships, state budget (National Plan for the Sustainable Development of Digital Infrastructure (Broadband) 2020–2025, Broadband Expansion in Rural Areas)	Rural communities	Expand high-speed broadband infrastructure in underserved areas	Reduce the digital divide between urban and rural areas	Unclear	Unclear
European Union[9] (EU for Gender Equality in Albania, EU4GE)	Women and girls	Promote gender equality and empower women in the digital sector	Address gender disparities in digital access and skills	Unclear	Unclear

9 https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/digjitalizimi_dhe_tik_web_08102023.pdf

Funding Source	Beneficiary	Description of objectives	Digital inclusion	Overall budget (EUR)	Dedicated Digital inclusion budget (EUR)
European Commission, Erasmus+ Capacity Building in the Field of Youth[10] (Youth Participation in Digital Democracy: From Digital Skills to Digital Rights (SCiDEV))	Youth from Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and Spain	Equip youth with digital skills to influence digital decision-making and strengthen democracy	Enhance youth participation in digital spaces and ensure their voices are heard	300.000 EUR	300.000 EUR
European Union, Governments of Sweden and Switzerland, UNDP, Government of Albania (STAR3 Project: Digital Readiness Assessment of Municipalities)[11]	Municipalities, general public	Assess and enhance the digital readiness of municipalities and the public	Improve access to digital public services and strengthen digital capacities at the local level	3,608,500 EUR	Unclear
World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development)[12]	General population, the poor, the elderly, women with limited formal education, and persons with disabilities.	Supporting public sector reforms, innovations, public service delivery, human capital development, and promoting sustainable and inclusive growth.	Improve access to digital services for the general population, the poor, the elderly, women with limited formal education, and persons with disabilities.	135,400,000 EUR (145.00.000 US$)	Unclear
Albanian-American Development Foundation[13]	Pupils	Introducing an ICT curriculum to elementary education in Albania to narrow the digital divide in the country	Narrow the digital divide in the country.	3,000,000 EUR (3.300.000 US$)	Unclear

10 https://rinia.gov.al/en/fillon-projekti-pjesemarrja-e-te-rinjte-ne-demokracine-digjitale-nga-aftesite-digjitale-te-te-drejtat/

11 https://euprojects.al/euprojects/star3-sustaining-and-advancing-local-governance-reform/

12 https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P177845

13 https://www.aadf.org/project/elementit/

Funding Source	Beneficiary	Description of objectives	Digital inclusion	Overall budget (EUR)	Dedicated Digital inclusion budget (EUR)
United Nations[14] **Digital Transformation Window call of the Joint SDG Fund** **(Digital Agriculture and Rural Transformation)** **(The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Finance and Economy)**	Farmers, students, vocational and educational training schools and centres, and public sector employees	Improving the delivery of digital public services through the Albanian Farmers' Portal, developing digital capacities among small-scale farmers, students, technical vocational and educational training schools and centres, and public sector employees	7500 women will be beneficiaries of digital services, and 290 others will develop digital skills Training will be provided to over 180 students and 120 young farmers	3.000.000 EUR	Unclear

14 https://albania.un.org/en/283080-united-nations-launches-ambitious-programme-sustainable-digital-transformation-albania%E2%80%99s

Table D2

Summary of research findings

		This finding is not at all consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is partially consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is very consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is completely consistent with the research findings in my country	Assessment is not possible due to a lack of research or other reasons
EQUALITY OF ACCESS TO THE INTERNET AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES	Research shows a significant difference in access to the Internet and digital technologies between urban and rural areas. People from rural areas often have limited access to the internet and technology.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	The National Plan for the Sustainable Development of Digital Infrastructure (Broadband) 2020–2025 emphasizes that a "significant rural-urban digital gap persists, mainly due to the lack of adequate infrastructure to provide meaningful connectivity" (p. 6). While ICT infrastructure is relatively well developed in urban centers, the gap is stark in rural areas: although rural areas represent 39.7% of the population, only 3.4% of rural residents are connected to the internet, with fixed internet penetration at just 2%, compared to 12% in urban areas (pp. 15–16). These disparities are also echoed in the work of Rama and Polo (2023), which identifies rural connectivity as a major infrastructural challenge and a barrier to growth.				
EQUALITY OF ACCESS TO THE INTERNET AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES	Research shows a significant difference in access to the Internet and digital technologies among different socioeconomic groups. Older people, people with disabilities, people with lower levels of education, etc., have limited access to the internet and technology.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	Research shows significant disparities in internet access and digital technology use among different socioeconomic groups. The UNDP's 2024 report Assessing Municipal and Public e-Readiness in Albania finds that older adults exhibit a strong preference for in-person services, with 76% choosing face-to-face interactions, reflecting low levels of digital engagement. The report also highlights that persons with disabilities and those with low educational attainment face additional barriers due to limited digital skills and lack of accessible infrastructure (UNDP, 2024).				

		This finding is not at all consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is partially consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is very consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is completely consistent with the research findings in my country	Assessment is not possible due to a lack of research or other reasons
DIGITAL SKILLS	Many studies indicate that a significant part of the population (especially older people and people with low levels of education) lacks basic digital skills, significantly hindering their use of digital tools and access to important information.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	According to Rama and Polo (2023), individuals with lower educational attainment often lack the foundational ICT competencies needed to participate in the digital economy. Similarly, the UNDP (2024) report on municipal e-readiness in Albania finds that 76% of people over age 50 prefer in-person services, reflecting discomfort with digital platforms. The report also highlights persistent digital skill gaps among persons with disabilities.					
IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	The pandemic accelerated the transition to digital services in education, work, and everyday life. Research shows that many people have become more aware of the importance of digital skills and tools during this period, but there are still major differences in the ability to adapt.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated Albania's transition to digital services in education, work, and daily life, increasing public awareness of the importance of digital skills. Gugu and Kristo (2023) found that many lecturers and students struggled with the sudden shift to online learning due to limited prior digital experience and inadequate training. Similarly, Çaro et al. (2024) reported that while students acknowledged the value of digital education, many faced psychological and infrastructural barriers.					

		This finding is not at all consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is partially consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is very consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is completely consistent with the research findings in my country	Assessment is not possible due to a lack of research or other reasons
TRUST IN TECHNOLOGY	Research shows that citizens' concerns regarding the privacy and security of data when using digital services can further affect their willingness to engage in the digital world.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	Research shows that concerns over data privacy and security significantly limit Albanians' engagement with digital services. The 2023 Trust in Governance report by the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) highlights that a lack of trust in institutions and fear of personal data misuse discourage many from using platforms like e-Albania (IDM, 2023). Similarly, a 2023 study by SCiDEV found that 27.6% of youth reduced their online participation due to privacy and safety concerns (SCiDEV, 2023).					
TRAINING INITIATIVES	There are a growing number of programmes and initiatives that focus on increasing digital literacy, especially among vulnerable groups, such as older adults, women, and people with disabilities. Research often emphasizes the need for continuous education and training in this area, along with the need to enrich the offer.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	Research highlights the need for continuous digital literacy training, particularly among vulnerable groups such as older adults, women, and persons with disabilities. A 2025 study found that individuals from these groups often rely on family or civil society support to access digital services (Edutask Institute, 2025). Similarly, the 2024 UNDP report on e-readiness identifies gaps in digital competencies among both municipal employees and citizens, especially in smaller municipalities, and emphasizes the need for long-term strategies to improve digital literacy (UNDP, 2024).					

		This finding is not at all consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is partially consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is very consistent with the research findings in my country	This finding is completely consistent with the research findings in my country	Assessment is not possible due to a lack of research or other reasons
CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION	Research shows that the education system in our country is still not fully adapted to digital learning. Additional investments in infrastructure and teacher training are needed to enable the integration of digital tools into teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	A 2022 report by the European Training Foundation highlights that many vocational education and training (VET) institutions lack up-to-date equipment and dedicated ICT staff, hindering the development of students' digital competencies. Furthermore, a UNESCO education policy review (2017) identifies that teacher preparation programs often do not align with the broader education system's needs, particularly in equipping educators with the skills necessary for effective digital instruction.					
POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	Research indicates the need for stronger policies and strategies at the national level to improve digital inclusion. There are initiatives at the government level, but more coordination and resources are needed.	1	2	3	4	5
Provide a brief explanation of your answer. When explaining your answer, supplement your answer with numerical indicators and/or other research findings in your national context whenever possible.	The 2025 report Exploring the Digital Divide among Marginalized Groups in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia highlights that digital inclusion efforts are often fragmented, with limited coordination among government agencies, leading to inconsistent access to digital services for vulnerable populations (Edutask Institute, 2025). Similarly, the Assessing Municipal and Public e-Readiness in Albania report by UNDP (2024) underscores the lack of comprehensive strategies at the municipal level, noting that many local governments lack the necessary infrastructure and trained personnel to implement digital services effectively.					