To the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament.

Public administration, banks and energy suppliers, as well as employers, health providers… have moved online, and counters, mail services and phone lines are disappearing.

Yet, more than 40% of Europe's population still lacks basic digital skills, preventing them from accessing certain essential services.

There is an urgent need to guarantee off-line access to all essential services.

An open letter supported by:

and:

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Digital technology has become essential

The digitisation of society is accelerating and now affects most of our daily life. Public administration, banks and energy suppliers, as well as employers and health providers have moved online. At the same time, offline alternative channels such as counters, mail services and phone lines are disappearing.

2 out of 5 Europeans are digitally vulnerable

This digitisation process is taking place at a time when more than 40% of Europe's population still lacks basic digital skills. [1]

Older people, those with poor literacy, people with disability, but also women and migrants with precarious status are amongst the most digitally vulnerable groups. [2] In some cases, digital inequalities reinforce existing social difficulties. Instead of improving access, digitisation therefore accelerates a downward spiral and leads to situations such as the non-take up of social rights, financial exclusion, loss of autonomy or energy supplies being cut off.

The paradox of the European strategy

Today, there is a paradox as we witness a European strategy that strongly encourages further digitisation of all kinds of services whilst a digital gap persists digitisation, with over 40% of European citizens unable to use the digital tools and technologies required to access online services.

This situation risks undermining a number of shared EU values regarding essential services [3] such as accessibility, universal access and equal treatment. Many of these shared values were embodied in 2017 through the common adoption of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*, whose principle 20 enshrined the right to access essential services: Everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need. [4]

Despite this paradox, the EU Digital Decade strategy has not changed its digitisation target: 100% of public services, including health care, should move online by 2030. [5]

Training and the automation of rights: problematic solutions

We recognize the many efforts taken by the EU and its members states to trigger digital inclusion and widen assistance for vulnerable people to access digital services. These efforts, however, are only part of the solution to the issue of digital inequality.

Regardless of how much money is invested in training services, learning takes time – particularly for the 20% of Europeans with low overall literacy levels. [6] Moreover, some digital technologies and tools will remain out of reach for people with disabilities who often already face barriers with regard to general education.

Automated data processing, made available through the growing development and use of digital platforms, may create further issues for individuals and families facing social exclusion. Data analysis algorithms have been heralded as a way for citizens to access healthcare and social services, yet this technology might reinforce discrimination instead of tackling it. Recent examples in the Netherlands [7] and France [8] show that thousands of families have been wrongly suspected or even accused of social fraud by algorithms that reinforce racial, class or gender stereotypes, in some cases depriving households of the income they need to survive.

A moratorium to restore access to essential services, debate and legislate

We are aware that digitisation is a global trend that will continue, but we call upon EU leaders to act to slow down unrestricted digitalisation of essential services and avoid the growth of digital inequalities.

We are therefore asking for a moratorium that would freeze the development of digitisation of essential services on a European scale.

A moratorium is necessary in order to restore accessibility to all essential services, and would require the right to multichannel access (the click-call-connect principle) to be protected in European law. Offline channels such as counters and phone-based helplines should be provided to cover citizens' needs and should not involve any additional costs.

In 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, representing the voice of 700 million Europeans, adopted a resolution on the digital divide recommending that Member States 'move from fully paperless to fully accessible public services, including by maintaining non-digital access to public services wherever necessary to ensure equal access to public services, their continuity and their adaptation to users. [9] A moratorium could provide the time needed by Member States to implement the Council of Europe's recommendation.

A moratorium would also give our societies time to organise a democratic debate on the kind of digital technology we wish to have. Such a discussion is urgently needed in order to build a digital world that is based on the needs and wishes of all our citizens, including those who are often underrepresented.

And finally, a moratorium could give us the necessary time to draw up and enact laws that protect the general interest and provide a support framework for the political project we have chosen.

[1] European Commission, 2022. *Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2022*. *Human Capital*, p. 7.

[2] For more statistics regarding digitally vulnerable groups at European level, see *DESI report* 2023: *DESI 2023 dashboard for the Digital Decade*.

[3] Services are considered "essential" when their low or non-use is likely to generate discrimination in terms of access to social rights (e-administration and e-banking), healthcare (e-health), and commercial opportunities linked to the consumption of goods and services (e-commerce). See: ***Access to essential services - Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights***.

[4] European Commission. ***Access to essential services***.

[5] European Commission. ***Europe's Digital Decade: digital targets for 2030***.

[6] Council of the European Union, 2016. ***Recommandation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults***, Brussels (2016/C 484/01).

[7] Amnesty International, 2021. ***Xenophobic machines. Discrimination through unregulated use of algorithms in the Dutch childcare benefits Scandal***.

[8] France Culture, 12 February 2024. ***Justice sociale : quand les algorithmes de la CAF discriminent les plus précaires***, *Le Biais d'Esther Duflo*.

[9] Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2023. **Resolution 2510:** ***Closing the digital divide: promoting equal access to digital technologies***.