

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

SMART SOCIAL POLICIES: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the impact of digital transformation on social policy and discusses the concept of 'smart social policy' at a theoretical and practical level. It emphasises that digitalisation has the potential to increase the accessibility, accountability and efficiency of public services, while exploring the transformations and potential threats/risks in social policy practice through phenomena such as data-driven decision-making, algorithmic governance and the digital welfare state. The study assesses the impact of digital technologies on the delivery of social assistance in the context of the limitations of traditional mechanisms and the risk of digital exclusion; it discusses the role of algorithms in public service delivery through different governance implications. It also discusses the impact of digital systems on transparency, accountability and public trust, as well as risks such as privacy, ethics and discrimination. The article argues that smart social policies should not be limited to technical solutions but should be integrated with inclusive and flexible structures that take into account the human dimension. Finally, it argues that digitalised social policies should be evaluated from a critical and interdisciplinary perspective for a sustainable and just social order.

Keywords: Smart Social Policy, Digital Welfare State, Algorithmic Governance, Digital Exclusion. Transparency and Accountability

JEL Classification: I31, I38, H75

AKILLI SOSYAL POLİTİKALAR: DİJİTAL DÖNÜŞÜM VE SOSYAL YARDIMLARIN DÖNÜŞÜMÜ

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, dijital dönüşümün sosyal politika alanındaki etkilerini analiz ederek "akıllı sosyal politikalar" kavramını teorik ve uygulamalı düzeyde tartışmaktadır. Dijitalleşmenin kamu hizmetlerinin erişilebilirliğini, hesap verebilirliğini ve etkinliğini artırma potansiyeline sahip olduğu vurgulanmakta; aynı zamanda veri temelli karar alma, algoritmik yönetim ve dijital refah devleti gibi olgular üzerinden sosyal politika uygulamalarında meydana gelen dönüşümleri ve potansiyel tehditleri/ riskleri incelenmektedir. Çalışmada, dijital teknolojilerin sosyal yardımların sunumuna etkisi, geleneksel mekanizmaların sınırları ve dijital dışlanma riski bağlamında değerlendirilmekte; algoritmaların kamu hizmeti sunumundaki rolü çeşitli yönetim etkileri üzerinden ele alınmaktadır. Ayrıca, dijital sistemlerin şeffaflık, hesap verebilirlik ve kamu güveni üzerindeki etkileri ile mahremiyet, etik ve ayrımcılık gibi riskler de tartışılmaktadır. Makale, akıllı sosyal politikaların yalnızca teknik çözümlerle sınırlı kalmaması gerektiğini; bu politikaların insani boyutu dikkate alan, kapsayıcı ve esnek yapılarla bütünleştirilmesi

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gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, dijitalleşen sosyal politikaların sürdürülebilir ve adil bir toplumsal düzen için eleştirel ve disiplinler arası bir perspektifle değerlendirilmesi gerektiği ileri sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akıllı Sosyal Politika, Dijital Refah Devlet, Algoritmik Yönetişim, Dijital Dışlanma, Şeffaflık ve Hesap Verebilirlik

JEL Sınıflandırması: I31, I38, H75

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the global digital revolution has led to a radical paradigm shift that has profoundly transformed social structures and citizenship. The process of digitisation requires the construction of digital identities of individuals in a wide range of domains, from state-citizen interaction to social network dynamics, from financial systems to consumption habits. These digital tools, which have the potential to shape social perceptions and transform institutional structures, are playing an increasingly decisive role in all spheres of life. However, despite the prevalence of the socio-political effects of digitalisation, the fact that this topic has not been systematically addressed in the social policy literature – apart from the limited literature discussed below – can be seen as an academic shortcoming. At the root of this situation is the epistemological separation of technological developments from the normative framework of social policy. However, this approach is not unique to social policy but reflects a methodological tendency that can be observed across the social sciences.

This paradigmatic attitude in the social sciences is largely related to ontological uncertainties regarding the position of ‘non-human’ actors (algorithms, artificial intelligence systems, automation mechanisms) in the social order. In addition, the methodological inadequacies of social science researchers with regard to the technical dimensions of digital transformation mean that academic production in this field remains limited (Henman, 2022:536). However, in a post-industrial age where technological determinism has transformed social structures to such an extent, it is not an epistemologically defensible position for social policy to ignore these developments. The digital transformation is a broad process, leading to radical changes in many areas, from the economy to governance, and the field of social policy cannot remain outside this transformation. On the contrary, the opportunities offered by digital technologies hold significant potential for making social protection systems more inclusive, equitable and effective. Recent studies show that the use of digital technologies in social policy practice is increasing (Larsson & Teigland, 2019: 3).

In this context, it is an academic imperative to reposition the phenomenon of digitalisation within the discipline of social policy at a theoretical and methodological level. This study aims to provide a framework for how digital technologies can be mobilised in a ‘smart’ way through social policy practices and local governance mechanisms, and how policy-making processes can be made more transparent, participatory and accountable. This approach may play a crucial role in increasing the effectiveness of social policy mechanisms, ensuring fairness in resource allocation and generating specific solutions to heterogeneous needs.

This study conducted a theoretical analysis based on qualitative research methods to examine the impact of digital transformation in the field of social policy. The research systematically reviewed academic literature, reports from international organisations and case studies to understand the multidimensional nature of the relationship between digitalisation and social policy. Key concepts such as the digital welfare state, algorithmic governance, data-driven decision making and digital exclusion are critically evaluated within the framework of theoretical approaches and implementation models. In this context, it is an academic imperative to reposition the phenomenon of digitalisation within the discipline of social policy at a theoretical and methodological level. This study aims to provide a framework for how digital technologies can be mobilised in a 'smart' way through social policy practices and local governance mechanisms, and how policy-making processes can be made more transparent, participatory and accountable. This approach can play a crucial role in increasing the effectiveness of social policy mechanisms, ensuring fairness in resource allocation and generating specific solutions to heterogeneous needs.

The study also includes comparative case studies to illustrate the effectiveness and risks of digital social policy practices. In this context, the study focuses on the 'Robodebt' system implemented in Australia and the SyRI model in the Netherlands; normative issues such as transparency, accountability, discrimination and privacy are discussed through these examples. The data was collected using the method of documentary analysis and an interdisciplinary framework, drawing on the disciplines of public administration, sociology and ethics. This methodological approach made it possible to evaluate the process of integrating digital technologies into social policy not only in its technical dimensions, but also in its human, managerial and ethical aspects.

In many countries today, digital technologies are increasingly being integrated into social assistance processes; while this transformation has increased the speed and efficiency of services, it may be insufficient to meet the specific needs of disadvantaged groups in particular. Issues such as digital exclusion, algorithmic bias and lack of transparency raise questions about the extent to which these new systems are compatible with the principles of equity and inclusion. This study first discusses the historical and conceptual implications of digitalisation for social policy, and then aims to provide a critical and normative evaluation within the framework of the concept of 'smart social policy' by analysing digital social assistance practices.

2. The Impact of Digitalisation on Social Policy

2.1. Integration of Digitalisation and Social Policy

The advent of the first technological applications in the field of social policy occurred in the post-World War II era. During this period, particularly in countries such as the UK, Australia and the USA, there was significant progress in the adoption of technology for the management of social policies. In addition to the development of pension and national insurance systems in the UK, the integration of technology commenced concurrently in the social service records of local governments, the processing of pension payments in Australia, and the registration processes of social services in local governments in the USA (Henman, 2022:537). In the coming years, with the increasing digitisation of society and the economy, the role of technology in the management of social policy is set to become increasingly critical. The advent of

online applications has facilitated the accessibility of public services via digital devices, such as computers and smartphones, thereby enabling individuals to submit applications through virtual platforms (Eubanks, 2018:47) (Braithwaite, 2020:246). The digital transformation efforts of governments at both national and local levels have resulted in a significant acceleration in citizens' access to public services. These developments have not only been limited to public institutions; civil society organisations and other non-state actors have also been involved in the digitalisation process, automating their services and increasing their interaction with society. The advent of data analytics and artificial intelligence technologies has enabled governments to analyse citizenship profiles with greater precision, refine eligibility criteria, formulate policies for disadvantaged groups and implement individualised social policy practices.

The prevailing assertion within the digital society is that it will engender enhancements in nearly every facet of life, particularly in pivotal social, economic, and governance domains (Lupton, 2015:8). One of the primary tenets of this claim pertains to the more effective mobilisation and optimisation of resource utilisation. The digital transformation process, through real-time online information flow, algorithmic systems, data-driven decision-making mechanisms, data-driven management approach and big data applications, significantly overlaps with another trend that has been prominent in public and private sector management in recent years, namely the evidence-based management paradigm (Morrell and Learmouth, 2017:419). Evidence-based management is supported by procedures, practices and managerial frameworks that aim to minimise bias, improve decision quality and systematise organisational learning processes. This approach, in conjunction with the data-intensive ecosystem facilitated by digitalisation, provides a framework for the structuring of decision-making processes in a more rational, objective and measurable manner.

2.2. Impact of Digitalisation on Governance of Social Policy

An algorithm is defined as a process that operates systematically on specific inputs and produces results according to predefined rules. The development of computer algorithms is achieved through the utilisation of computer codes, which facilitate the execution of operations on numerical, visual or textual data. However, it is important to note that the concept of algorithm is not limited to computers; in a broader framework, for example, a recipe can also be considered as an algorithm. This is due to the fact that the meticulous preparation of specific ingredients in a specific sequence as delineated by a recipe results in the desired outcome, that is to say, the creation of a culinary masterpiece. Consequently, despite the recent surge in interest in algorithms, the notion of an algorithm itself has a long-standing history (Bozdag, 2013). In the contemporary era, both the state and the private sector extensively utilise algorithms in decision-making processes. It is imperative to comprehend the utilisation of digital instruments, devised using algorithms, within the domain of policy-making processes and the ramifications that this utilisation may engender, particularly with regard to anticipating the social ramifications that emergent applications of these digital instruments may engender. In this section, the impact of algorithms and digitalisation on the policy process in the governance of social policy is examined. For instance, the present applications of blockchain technology in the domain of social policy, as evidenced by case studies in this field, unmistakably demonstrate its capacity to enhance the efficiency, transparency and traceability of various social services (Özdemir et al., 2024:18).

The impact of digitalisation on the evolution of social policy has resulted in transformative ruptures in both policy substance and governance structures. The inception of computer technologies was marked by their utilisation in the automation of fundamental administrative procedures within the implementations of social policy. This development enabled the mechanisation of conventional operations, including records management, benefit calculations, payment tracking, and the generation of statistical data within national insurance systems. However, the proliferation of digitalisation has concomitantly engendered the emergence of novel models of social policy governance. These novel forms of governance have been the subject of critique, with particular emphasis on the transformation of the concept of ‘street-level bureaucracy’ (Zouridis et al., 2019:3). While the discretion of practitioners has traditionally played a central role in social services, the transfer of this authority to algorithmic systems in the digitalisation process has led to the evolution of bureaucracy to ‘screen-level bureaucracy’. Whilst this transition has limited arbitrary practices and abuse through standardisation of rules and rationalisation of the legal framework, it has also had negative consequences, such as reduced direct interaction with citizens. In the Nordic countries, for instance, digital tools are designed to support rather than eliminate the role of experts in decision-making processes (Adler & Henman, 2009). Nevertheless, this has not impeded the growing divide between experts and policymakers.

Another criticism of digitalisation is the risk that automated services will increasingly be handed over to non-state actors (privatised organisations, non-governmental organisations or private companies), eroding public responsibility in the process. Digitalisation has also led to radical changes in the content of social policy. The advent of algorithmic decision-making mechanisms has precipitated an escalation in the differentiation, individualisation and personalisation of policies. In contrast to the conventional ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, there has been an emergence of flexible models that prioritise the distinct requirements of disadvantaged groups and regions, informed by data-driven risk analyses (Henman, 2011:12). In this process, the discretionary authority that was traditionally exercised by administrators or social workers is being entrusted to the codes of algorithms to an increasing degree. The advent of digital databases and sophisticated computer systems has also facilitated the implementation of conditional social policies. To illustrate this point, the following examples are provided: the conditionality of school attendance rates of children being linked with social assistance provided to families, or the conditionality of the completion of infant immunisations being linked with cash transfers.

3. Impact of Digital Transformation on Social Assistance Activities

3.1. Rethinking Social Assistance: From Traditional Limits to Digital Opportunities

It has been observed that the extant mechanisms utilised by policymakers in the provision of social assistance are inadequate in the face of the heterogeneous structure of households and their increasingly diversified needs. Conventional and non-personalised practices have been criticised for their failure to adequately address the unique needs and social conditions of disadvantaged groups. This shortcoming has been identified as a contributing factor to the limited effectiveness and accessibility of social policies. Digital technologies have been identified as a means to overcome the identified structural problems.

The integration of advanced technologies, including big data analytics, artificial intelligence and machine learning, into social assistance processes has been demonstrated to enable more effective and targeted delivery of services (Li & Jian 2025, Neto et al 2024, Ejim-Eze 2025, OECD 2025, Sahraoui & Zari 2025). The real-time analysis of the socioeconomic profiles and needs of households facilitates the development of bespoke social assistance programmes, ensuring the more efficient use of resources and a more equitable distribution of assistance (Gillingham, 2017: 160). The development of flexible social assistance models that can instantly adapt to changing demographic and economic conditions is considered an important orientation in terms of future policy designs and research (Desiere & Struyven, 2021:8). Such systems increase the resilience of social assistance mechanisms, especially in times of crisis or sudden social changes. Conversely, the integration of decentralised digital technologies, such as blockchain, into social assistance processes has been demonstrated to enhance transparency in resource allocation and facilitate the verification of aid delivery to the intended beneficiaries. For example, blockchain-based aid distribution systems allow both administrators and beneficiaries to trace the flow of resources in real time, thereby reducing the risk of fraud or misappropriation. This contributes to fostering public trust and reinforcing the legitimacy of social policies.

The uniform structure of traditional social assistance mechanisms, insensitive to the increasingly diverse needs of households (Eubanks, 2018), renders the transformative potential of digital technologies even more critical in the field of social policy. The advent of advanced technologies, including big data, artificial intelligence and machine learning, has not only facilitated precise targeting and real-time monitoring (Henman, 2019:75) but has also emerged as a strategic instrument in the reconstruction of social justice. This is evidenced by the increasing use of blockchain-based transparent resource distribution systems, which have been shown to enhance accountability in public services. Nevertheless, this digital transformation process carries with it systemic risks, including the digital divide, algorithmic bias and data privacy issues.

In this context, the effectiveness of smart social policies is contingent on the design of technological infrastructure and human dimensions in a dialectical integrity. On the one hand, it is necessary to develop solutions sensitive to the unique social conditions of disadvantaged groups through individualised intervention opportunities and dynamic monitoring systems. Conversely, the establishment of inclusive mechanisms to prevent digital exclusion is imperative for the sustainability of a justice-based social assistance approach. This dual approach has been demonstrated to enhance the functionality of social assistance systems, whilst concomitantly reinforcing the legitimacy of the welfare state in the digital age by engendering public trust. Consequently, unless the digital transformation is addressed within a normative framework centred on technology-human interaction, it risks producing new forms of inequality instead of the inclusiveness it promises.

3.2 Transparency, Accountability, and Ethical Challenges

High-profile debates in the field of social policy in recent years have brought to light important legal, ethical, political and power relations issues in the policy-making process of digital social policy. In this context, a range of examples from various countries demonstrate that digital systems are not merely technical tools, but can also present significant challenges in terms of social justice, transparency and accountability. Among these examples, the On-

line Compliance Intervention (OCI) system developed for automatic debt collection, popularly known as 'robodebt' in Australia, and the SyRI social assistance fraud detection system, which was declared illegal in the Netherlands, are the two main cases (Henman, 2022:256). It is evident from these cases that digital social policy should not be regarded exclusively as a mechanism for automating service delivery. Instead, it should be regarded as an area necessitating re-evaluation in terms of individual rights, privacy, equality, public scrutiny and democratic accountability.

In the context of digital transformation initiatives, a novel public administration industry has emerged, termed 'digital government' or 'e-government'. Since 2001, the United Nations has been regularly publishing E-Government Development Surveys and scoring countries according to the level of use of the internet in public services (P. Henman, 2019). These reports provide states with guidance on how they can improve their e-government practices and offer various policy recommendations and advocacy activities. In a similar vein, the OECD is also investigating the potential for transformation of social assistance services through the utilisation of technological opportunities presented by digital transformation. In the aforementioned processes, the most common rationales for the digitalisation of the state pertain to enhancing efficiency in public services, reducing costs, improving service quality, strengthening accountability, and ensuring transparency (Noveck, 2009).

The increasing use of artificial intelligence, data analytics and algorithms in the field of social policy has given rise to concerns regarding digitalisation. These concerns are centred on the profiling of individuals, risk assessments, the making of predictions based on probabilities rather than facts, and legal and ethical issues. Algorithms that are capable of treating individuals differently according to characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion give rise to significant concerns with regard to the risk of discrimination (Graham & Wood, 2003:229). In the context of digitalised social policies, the 'closed box' nature of the systems, i.e. the uncertainty surrounding the mechanisms of algorithmic decision-making, has been the subject of considerable criticism in terms of transparency and accountability. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in studies on the explainability and transparency of such algorithmic decision-making processes (Pasquale, 2015:8). Furthermore, the view that digital systems should be operated under human supervision is gaining importance. Criticism is mounting against the application of uniform algorithms to all individuals in a uniform manner, wherein expert discretion is entirely excluded, and the necessity to develop individualised and diversified algorithms is being emphasised. Within this theoretical framework, the enhancement of digitalised social policies through the integration of human support has the potential to address existing criticisms and enhance the efficacy of these policies.

4. Smart Social Policy Concept and Policy Design

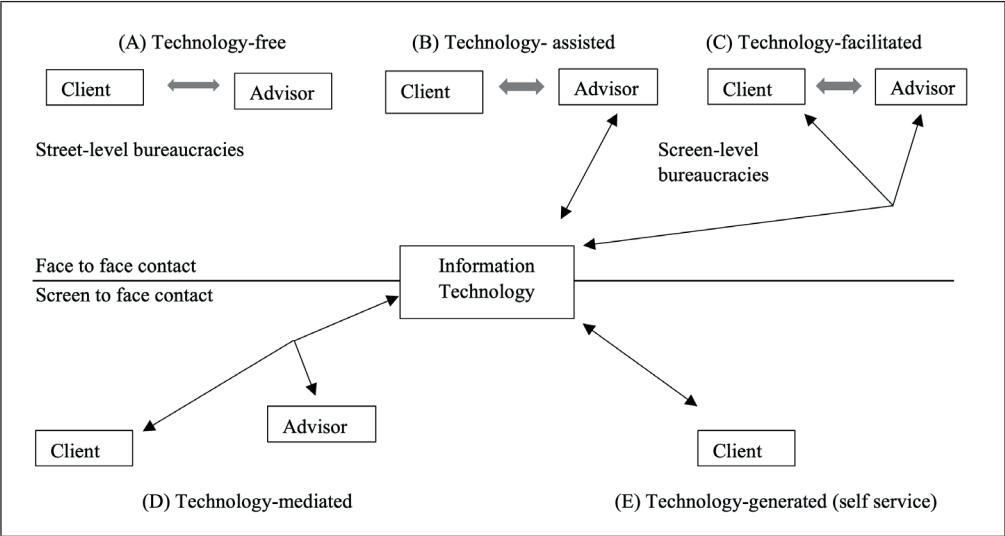
4.1. Smart Social Policy Concept and Theoretical Background

Smart social policies represent a novel generation policy paradigm, reflecting the transformative impact of digital transformation on the welfare state and restructures social protection systems through data-driven decision-making mechanisms, algorithmic analyses and flexible service models. This approach is not confined to fiscal rationalisation; it is grounded in the principles of universal coverage of social rights, individualised flexibility in service

delivery and algorithmic fairness in resource allocation. This model strategically combines the possibilities offered by digital technologies with the core functions of the welfare state – decommodification, social citizenship and risk management – and thus marks the evolution of social policy in the 21st century. The employment of data-driven forecasting systems and dynamic monitoring and evaluation tools enables the system to transcend the rigid structures of traditional welfare regimes, thus offering an adaptive governance framework that is sensitive to heterogeneous social needs. Consequently, the implementation of smart social policies represents not only a technical enhancement but also a normative transformation project, wherein social justice is redefined through the utilisation of digital tools.

A salient issue in defining the concept of smart social policy is the interaction of digitalised social policies with numerous concepts. In this conceptual framework, the terms ‘screen-level bureaucracy’, ‘machine bureaucracy’ and ‘digital welfare state’ are of particular note. New structures shaped by algorithms within the scope of digitalised social policies gradually replace human bureaucracy with machine bureaucracy. In the context of this transformation, it has been argued that public officials are reduced to a role limited to facilitating the citizen’s relationship with the interface through digital information systems instead of interacting directly with citizens in the traditional sense (Bullock, 2019:755). Nevertheless, the pivotal consideration in this regard pertains to the extent of authority accorded with regard to the governance of algorithms. Such criticisms may be valid if digital platforms are designed solely on the basis of personnel receiving citizen requests and entering data into the system. Conversely, when digital systems are designed with qualified personnel who can intervene not only in data entry but also with humanitarian discretion when necessary, such problems can be prevented. This approach enables the optimisation of efficiency facilitated by digitalisation while preserving the balancing role of the human element.

Figure 1: Models of (digital) service encounters



Source: Considine, M., McGann, M., Ball, S., & Nguyen, P. (2022). Can Robots Understand Welfare? Exploring Machine Bureaucracies in Welfare-to-Work. *Journal of Social Policy*, 51(3), 519–534.

The delivery of welfare services is now manifest in a variety of forms. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the primary distinction between these forms pertains to the medium through which service delivery occurs: face-to-face or screen-based. Model A is representative of the conventional welfare service delivery model, which is predicated on conventional bureaucracy at the street level. In this model, counsellors assume a pivotal role in the decision-making process. In this model, the delivery of services is primarily subject to the discretion of the relevant public official. In Models B and C, it is evident that technology has begun to be incorporated into welfare services. In Model B, the counsellor remains a pivotal figure in the decision-making process, albeit with technological support. In Model C, the role of technology is further augmented; citizens are able to access certain services directly through digital tools. In model D, where the transition from street bureaucracy to system bureaucracy is more evident, citizens access services through digital platforms and receive support from staff only in case of problems. At this stage, the role of public officials is confined to the provision of technical support. In contrast, model E incorporates a fully automated structure. In this model, citizens submit their requests through digital systems without the need for personnel, and algorithms decide which action to take in line with these requests. When these models are evaluated, it is understood that digitalised welfare services have different dimensions and the criticisms against digital social policies may differ for each model. Consequently, analyses and policy studies to determine which model is used and what kind of improvements can make this model more inclusive, fair and effective are of great importance.

4.2. Impacts of Digital Inclusion and Exclusion Risks on Social Policy Design

Digitalisation has been demonstrated to enhance accountability and accessibility within social policies. Furthermore, it has furnished novel opportunities for the monitoring and evaluation of policy processes. In particular, digital datasets accumulated over time can be analysed with actuarial and statistical methods, thus contributing to the measurement and reshaping of policy effectiveness. New Zealand's 'social investment' model is a pertinent example of this phenomenon. This approach is predicated on the premise that decisions pertaining to social security, child protection and service provision are to be supported by data-driven projections and cost-benefit analyses (O'Brien, 2020:4-5). Nevertheless, a salient paradox of digitalisation in the domain of social policy pertains to its capacity to perpetuate existing inequalities. This problem, defined as the 'digital divide' and arising from inequalities in access to technology, can restrict the access of disadvantaged groups to digitalised services (Notley & Foth, 2008:13). Consequently, digital inclusion policies have become an integral part of social policy. Digitalisation has had a profound impact on the governance dynamics, content and delivery modes of social policy. Whilst this process offers certain advantages, such as efficiency and transparency, it has also given rise to critical debates surrounding bureaucratic distance, privatisation risks and algorithmic discrimination. In order to design social policies in a fair and inclusive manner in the digital age, it is vital to acknowledge the human dimension of technological advances.

In the discourse surrounding the utilisation of algorithms for the delivery of social assistance, two primary benefits are frequently accentuated: the enhancement of both the efficiency and consistency of service delivery, and the conservation of public resources (Busch & Henriksen, 2018:4). However, it is imperative to emphasise that the pursuit of efficiency and cost savings in the implementation of smart social policies must not compromise the fundamental

objectives of these policies: personalisation, flexibility and inclusiveness. This is of particular significance given that digital welfare policies are frequently evaluated and associated solely in terms of cost reductions in welfare services (Malpas, 2020:1073). Nevertheless, the overarching objective of intelligent social policies is not solely cost-effectiveness, but also the provision of services that align with the requirements of individuals. Consequently, from a standpoint that transcends efficiency and cost-effectiveness, principles such as personalisation, flexibility, and inclusiveness must be regarded as instruments that facilitate a more rational utilisation of resources and a more precise identification of intricate needs and entitlements.

A salient risk concomitant with digital social policies pertains to the potential for exclusion. This risk is largely related to inequalities in access to information and communication technologies, i.e. information technology poverty. The digitalisation of welfare services has the potential to exacerbate existing disparities, as individuals lacking access to ICTs or digital tools may encounter significant challenges in accessing these services. This phenomenon may result in citizens seeking external support to access digital resources (O'Sullivan & Walker, 2018:501). The criticisms articulated in this context underscore the issue of digital technology access for disadvantaged segments of society, a point that has been previously emphasised. Consequently, enhancing technological literacy and broadening digital access are imperative for a 'smart social policy' approach that encompasses the entire population and mitigates digital exclusion. It is imperative that these elements be considered as constituent components of the digital welfare state; otherwise, the validity of the criticisms made can be substantiated.

Conversely, the theoretical framework of digitalised social policies suggests a heightened level of openness and transparency in policy implementation (Kleinberg et al., 2020:30100). The utilisation of discretionary power by street-level civil servants has been the subject of censure on the grounds that it may result in inconsistency in implementation. Such practices are frequently interpreted and criticised as exclusionary or favouritism.

5. Conclusion

A significant challenge encountered during the process of digitalisation of public services is the historical reluctance of the public sector to embrace change (Fronza & Moriceau, 2008). As a non-profit organisation, the public sector does not possess the same degree of intrinsic motivation to pioneer innovative technologies as the private sector. Consequently, it has a marked tendency to persist with conventional methodologies (Larsson & Teigland, 2019). This phenomenon engenders a constrained receptiveness to innovation within public organisations, accompanied by a systemic reluctance to embrace change. The decision-making and implementation processes in public organisations are predominantly shaped within bureaucratic structures and tend to perpetuate the status quo. Consequently, the implementation of digitalisation-based policies in public organisations frequently materialises as time-consuming, complex and large-scale initiatives. Digital transformation in organisational contexts necessitates not only technological modifications but also profound cultural and structural shifts.

Digital technologies and organisational transformation processes should be addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective and within the framework of a critical analysis. Technology should be conceptualised not only as a substitute for human labour, but also as a strategic tool

that radically transforms organisational structures, business models and operational dynamics. Algorithmic systems, in particular, through the codification of institutional practices, either restructure traditional policy-making processes and governance mechanisms or render their legitimacy questionable. In this context, it is imperative to critically evaluate the purported advantages of digital transformation by drawing upon historical experiences of automation. Such an analysis necessitates the cultivation of a more circumspect and critical awareness of digital innovations, entailing the interrogation of normative assumptions and the eschewal of reductionist approaches founded upon technological determinism. In this regard, it is imperative to eschew a naïve optimism towards technology and to adopt a more conscious and questioning epistemological stance that transcends the phenomenon of ‘technological enchantment’.

It is evident that digital technologies have played a substantial role in enhancing the accessibility and efficiency of public services. It is reasonable to hypothesise that these contributions will continue to grow in the future. Nevertheless, critical debates concerning the manner in which digitalisation and informatisation processes influence citizen-state relations have witnessed a marked increase in their salience within the academic literature in recent years. The expansion of digital footprints, whether voluntarily or unwittingly, further complicates this dilemma, leading to a gradual erosion of the boundaries between the protection of personal data and the state’s supervisory authority. In a similar manner, the tension between the potential of digital technologies to strengthen democratic values, such as transparency and accountability in public administration, and the risk of these technologies becoming instruments of authoritarian control, has been the subject of extensive debate within academic circles. In this framework, it is imperative that both policy makers and the academic community develop a continuous and critical reflex to ensure that digitalisation can proceed in a manner compatible with the core values of democratic societies. The evaluation of the effects of technological developments on social structures from an interdisciplinary and normative perspective is ultimately pivotal in the construction of a just, inclusive and sustainable social order.

In conclusion, this study reveals that the integration of digital technologies into the field of social policy should be evaluated not only with its technical dimensions but also with its normative, managerial and ethical aspects. Questions concerning the manner in which digital welfare practices transform individuals’ lives, the structural risks they harbour and the social future they build necessitate an interdisciplinary approach. In particular, the increasing role of algorithms in decision-making processes should be rethought in terms of the legitimacy, accountability and inclusiveness of public policies. In this context, the development of a people-oriented and justice-based understanding of ‘smart social policy’ that balances the tension between the opportunities offered by digitalisation and the inequalities it deepens, emerges as an inevitable necessity for the welfare systems of the digital age.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Approval

No specific ethical approval was necessary for the study.

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