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EXPERT ASSESSMENTS OF THE CHALLENGES OF DIGITALIZATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Abstract. This article presents the results of a study on the challenges associated with the digitalization of social services in rural communities of Ukraine. The study aimed to identify the principal problems and barriers that social work professionals face when introducing digital technologies into social support practices. The research used an expert survey method involving 18 social work practitioners representing 18 rural communities from different regions of Ukraine.

The findings indicate that the digitalization of social services in rural communities is uneven and hampered by multiple difficulties. Key challenges cited by respondents include insufficient technical infrastructure, limited access to stable Internet, low levels of digital competencies among both service users and providers, and a shortage of training programs and methodological guidance. Low public awareness of available digital services and weak intersectoral cooperation at the community level further complicate the digital transformation.

Challenges were grouped into four problem blocks: technical barriers, personnel limitations, organizational difficulties, and value-motivational aspects. To increase reliability, results are illustrated with direct quotes from experts, highlighting the practical dimension of the issue.

Based on expert assessments, the article proposes directions for overcoming the identified barriers: developing digital competencies of professionals and clients; creating inclusive digital infrastructure; preparing training and methodological resources for social work practitioners; strengthening interagency cooperation at the local level; and integrating national and regional digital transformation programs into rural development strategies.

The results are of practical relevance to local governments, social service providers, educational institutions, and NGOs seeking to improve accessibility and quality of social services in rural areas. They may also inform national policy on digitalization of the social sector, taking into account the specific needs and capacities of rural territories.

Keywords: social work, social services, community, rural community, digitalization, assessment in social work, digital competencies.

INTRODUCTION

Under conditions of martial law and extensive social transformations in Ukraine, digitalization has become a key tool for ensuring the resilience of the state and society. The development of digital services not only contributes to more effective resource management but also opens up opportunities for faster, more accessible, and more transparent provision of social services to citizens. This issue is particularly important in social work, where digital solutions enable reaching broader population groups, ensuring rapid access to information and minimizing administrative barriers.

Rural communities play a special role in this process. On the one hand, they often serve as host territories for internally displaced persons (IDPs); on the other hand, they face serious recovery challenges after de-occupation or due to proximity to combat zones. In these communities social services experience a dual pressure: rising demand for social assistance and a shortage of resources to deliver it. Digitalization can introduce innovative approaches to working with vulnerable groups — veterans, IDPs, persons with disabilities, children and families affected by war — by providing faster access to services and information.

However, implementing digital technologies in the social sphere of rural communities encounters a number of obstacles. These include an underdeveloped digital infrastructure, limited access to reliable Internet, low levels of digital literacy among the population, and a significant staffing deficit in social work. In particular, there is a shortage of qualified social workers who possess modern digital competencies. Since these professionals act as intermediaries between the state and citizens, this situation complicates the delivery of adequate social support.

The relevance of this study arises from the need for a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to digitalizing social services in rural communities and for identifying practical ways to overcome them. This article presents the results of an expert assessment conducted among social work specialists in 18 communities and thus outlines real-world challenges from the frontline of practice. The conclusions are important for both local authorities and policymakers, providing a basis for decisions aimed at developing digital services and strengthening the human capacity of the social sector in rural areas.

This article combines theoretical analysis and practical experience and can serve as a foundation for subsequent steps toward forming an effective and inclusive system of digital transformation for social services in Ukraine.

ANALYSIS OF RECENT STUDIES AND PUBLICATIONS

Research into the problems and needs of various population groups under wartime conditions has attracted the attention of the academic community for several years (Denysiuk, et al., 2023). Recent studies emphasize the importance of prioritizing state policies at all socio-economic levels, investing in digital assets, and regularly diagnosing the level of community digitalization (Vitiutin, & Merzhev, 2024). Growing research interest focuses on the quality of social service provision and the challenges of digitalization, including for rural communities in Ukraine (Gunko, et al., 2024); the need to adopt effective social work decisions and to implement digital solutions to help families with children and IDPs cope with difficult life circumstances (Liutyi, & Dulia, 2023); reducing administrative barriers and ensuring prompt access to social services

for vulnerable groups (Lekholetova, Spirina, & Dulia, 2025); and providing rapid psychosocial assistance and support to residents of rural communities (Liakh, Lekholetova, & Skipalska, 2021). The literature also stresses increasing investments in digital technologies and deploying innovations across key economic sectors (Nepran, & Solopun, 2022).

Gunko, Lekholetova, & Liakh (2025) described programs of digitalization of social services in Ukrainian communities (community informatization programs, smart community call-centers, mobile CNAP "suitcases", community chat-bots, participatory budgeting). They note that digitalization in Ukrainian communities can significantly enhance the development and quality of social services, improve the lives of vulnerable groups, and strengthen digital competencies of both practitioners and service users.

I. Sushik and O. Sushik identify advantages of electronic services such as 24/7 convenient access — including for people with disabilities — reduced administrative burden, shorter waiting times, availability regardless of location and time, and simple and comprehensible content (Sushik, & Sushik, 2023).

Javoronok, & Lopashchuk (2024) systematized existing and future risks of digitalizing the social sphere in Ukraine and argued that an effective level of digitalization can be reached through: establishing an integrated platform for comprehensive interagency interaction among social sector organizations, state authorities, and registries; developing an informational and integration resource to ensure secure and reliable electronic interactions between citizens and social service systems; and creating a specialized three-tier digital platform ('state/region/city') for integrated management and implementation of social programs based on digital technologies and international best practices.

In the context of this study, the conclusions of researchers examining the organization and implementation of humanitarian aid programs for vulnerable populations are also relevant (Spirina, Lekholetova, & Liakh, 2025). These authors emphasize the need to strengthen coordination among state structures, NGOs and international humanitarian organizations, an approach that would not only increase the effectiveness of humanitarian programs but also facilitate the digitalization of social services in rural communities during wartime.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of the article is to identify and systematize the challenges of digitalization of social services in rural communities of Ukraine based on expert assessments from social work professionals, and to substantiate possible ways to overcome these barriers to improve the effectiveness and accessibility of social support. To achieve this aim, a combination of complementary methods was used. The primary method was an expert survey involving 18 social work practitioners representing 18 rural communities from various regions of Ukraine. The collected data underwent qualitative content analysis to categorize responses and highlight the main problem blocks of digitalization: technical, personnel, organizational, and value-motivational.

To ensure authenticity, direct quotations were used to reflect the practical dimension of the problem as expressed by experts. Elements of SWOT analysis were employed to outline strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the digitalization of social services in rural communities, and a comparative approach

helped identify common and differing trends among communities with varying socio-economic characteristics. The methodological foundation of the research is grounded in human-centered and trauma-informed approaches oriented toward principles of digital inclusion and social justice.

MAIN PART

The study of digitalization of social services in rural communities of Ukraine was carried out under conditions of martial law, when demand for accessible and quality social services increased significantly. A qualitative methodological approach was applied, combining expert analysis with practitioners' experience. The expert survey included 18 social workers representing rural communities from different regions, ensuring contextual diversity — from communities hosting a substantial number of IDPs to areas recovering after de-occupation. This provided an empirically rich portrait of the state of digitalization of social services in rural areas and enabled identification of systemic challenges.

Results of the expert survey indicate that digitalization of social services in rural areas is uneven, fragmented, and faces multiple significant barriers. Identified challenges can be grouped into several main blocks reflecting both objective and subjective factors that slow the digital transformation of the social sector.

The first block concerns technical barriers. Many communities lack modern equipment, software, and stable Internet access. This is particularly true for remote villages where even basic Internet services are unreliable. Experts reported frequent situations in which a social worker has to travel to a district center to complete electronic forms or upload documents. These practices reduce work efficiency and pose additional difficulties for both practitioners and service users.

The second block refers to staffing issues. Communities experience shortages of social work professionals and, in particular, a deficit of those possessing adequate digital competencies. Experts emphasized that existing staff are often unprepared to use digital tools in routine work, and the absence of systematic training and professional development exacerbates the problem. For many practitioners, basic tasks — such as using state digital platforms or maintaining electronic records — are a substantial challenge.

The third block outlines organizational difficulties tied to managing digitalization processes at the community level. The lack of a unified strategy, weak coordination between local government departments and social services, and insufficient methodological guidance and state support lead to ad hoc and poorly supported digital initiatives. Experts noted that some communities are forced to operate 'in the dark', relying solely on their own resources and efforts.

The fourth block has a value-motivational character. It covers a low level of trust among parts of the rural population toward digital services and psychological barriers related to fears of making mistakes or losing data. In communities hosting IDPs or recovering from de-occupation, high levels of social vulnerability among clients further complicate the situation. The absence of information campaigns and navigational resources on using digital tools effectively excludes a significant share of the population from the digital environment.

To illustrate these blocks, experts' statements were systematized into an analytical table — 'Challenges of digitalization of social services in rural communities' (Table 1). The table lists specific problems grouped by category and includes direct quotations from practitioners. This approach not only reflects the real state of affairs but also provides empirical depth to the study.

Table 1. **Challenges of digitalization of social services in rural communities**

Category of challenges	Specific problem	Expert quote	Possible ways to overcome
Technical barriers	Unstable Internet access in certain villages	"In some villages the Internet disappears several times a day, and we cannot submit electronic reports on time."	Develop digital infrastructure; mobile digital social work points; state programs to expand Internet coverage
	Lack of modern computer equipment and software	"Our office uses computers that are over 10 years old and cannot support new programs."	Equip services with modern hardware; grant financing; create shared digital hubs
	Lack of citizen access to electronic services	"People bring paper documents because they have no smartphones or Internet at home."	Establish 'digital corners' in CNAPs and social service centers; group consultations by social workers
Territorial challenges	Long distances between settlements within a community	"To reach a remote village I spend several hours, and online connection there is unreliable."	Use mobile teams of social workers; provide remote consultations for those with Internet; transport support for social services
Staffing limitations	Shortage of social work professionals	"For a community of several thousand residents we have only two workers who cannot handle the caseload."	Increase staffing; support educational programs; develop volunteer assistance programs
	Low level of digital literacy among staff	"Many colleagues cannot even use basic electronic platforms."	Systemic training; mentorship by 'digital curators'; online courses for staff
	Burnout and overload	"We spend hours on technical tasks and have little time for face-to-face communication."	Apply case-management; distribute workload via digital tools; provide psychological support

Organizational difficulties	Lack of a unified digitalization strategy	“Each department acts on its own; there is no common system.”	Local digitalization strategies; coordination councils including social workers
	Insufficient methodological guidance and support	“We are often not explained how to work with new platforms.”	Simple step-by-step instructions; methodological workshops; mentoring from regional centers
Value-motivational aspects	Public distrust of digital services	“People say: I’d rather hand over papers than trust some system.”	Information campaigns; consultations by social workers; showcase successful case studies
	Psychological barriers and fear of technology	“Clients are afraid to press the wrong button and lose all data.”	Digital literacy trainings for life; workshops; involve digital volunteers
	Ageing population hindering Internet use	“Most of our clients are elderly and have never used a smartphone.”	Individual support by social workers; group classes for seniors; printed illustrated guides

Analysis of the results suggests several directions for overcoming the identified challenges. On the technical side, priority measures include development of digital infrastructure: ensuring stable Internet connectivity, upgrading equipment and providing access to modern software products. At the staffing level, preparing and retraining social work professionals to develop digital competencies and skills for working with electronic platforms is essential. The organizational dimension requires forming a unified community-level digitalization strategy with clear coordination and methodological support. Finally, to address value-motivational barriers, information and educational campaigns are needed to raise digital literacy, build trust in state and community digital services, and support vulnerable groups.

Thus, the study’s findings demonstrate that digitalization of social services in rural communities is a multidimensional process that requires a comprehensive approach. It cannot be reduced solely to technical upgrades, as it also involves working with human resources, changing organizational practices, and overcoming socio-cultural barriers. The challenges identified may serve as a basis for designing targeted support programs that combine state initiatives, local government efforts, and social work practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study confirms that digitalization of social services in rural communities is a multifaceted process demanding a systemic approach. Primary challenges include technical barriers, staffing limitations, organizational difficulties, value-motivational aspects, territorial factors, and an ageing population. These factors are interconnected

and create a complex environment in which social workers must balance the demands of digitalization with the real needs of clients.

A key conclusion is that digital transformation cannot be treated merely as technical modernization. It is directly connected to human capital — the level of workforce preparation and their ability to utilize digital tools — as well as to the readiness of the population to accept these changes. This is particularly critical for elderly people and IDPs, who often need additional support and individualized consultations.

At the national level, immediate priorities include developing a comprehensive strategy for digitalization of social services that takes into account the specific features of rural communities: providing reliable Internet access, supporting educational and re-training programs for personnel, creating methodological resources for practitioners, and implementing digital inclusion programs for vulnerable groups.

At the local government level, important tasks are to develop local digitalization strategies that combine infrastructural solutions with social work practices, strengthen interdepartmental coordination, establish coordination councils including social work specialists, and build partnerships with NGOs and volunteers.

For social service providers and practitioners, enhancing digital competencies, setting up mentorship systems, adopting case-management practices, creating 'digital corners' in communities, and organizing training for citizens are necessary. Social workers should act as mediators not only between clients and state services but also between people and digital technologies.

Consequently, digitalization of social services in rural areas goes far beyond technology and encompasses issues of accessibility, social justice, trust, and human resources. Only a holistic approach combining infrastructure development, workforce capacity building, and public support can ensure meaningful transformation of social work in rural communities.

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ЕКСПЕРТНІ ОЦІНКИ ВИКЛИКІВ ЦИФРОВІЗАЦІЇ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ ПОСЛУГ У СІЛЬСЬКИХ ГРОМАДАХ

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Анотація. У статті представлено результати дослідження, присвяченого викликам цифровізації соціальних послуг у сільських громадах України. Метою роботи стало виявлення ключових проблем і бар'єрів, що постають перед фахівцями із соціальної роботи у процесі впровадження цифрових технологій у практику соціальної підтримки населення. Дослідження здійснено методом експертного опитування, у якому взяли участь 18 фахівців із соціальної роботи, які представляли 18 сільських громад із різних регіонів країни.

Отримані результати засвідчили, що цифровізація соціальних послуг у сільських громадах відбувається нерівномірно і супроводжується низкою труднощів. Серед ключових викликів респонденти виокремили: недостатність технічної інфраструктури, обмеженість доступу населення до стабільного інтернету, низький рівень цифрових компетентностей як отримувачів, так і надавачів соціальних послуг, а також дефіцит навчальних програм і методичного супроводу. Важливим чинником, який ускладнює процес цифровізації, є низька поінформованість населення про наявні цифрові сервіси та відсутність належної міжсекторальної взаємодії у громаді.

Виклики було систематизовано у кілька проблемних блоків: технічні бар'єри, кадрові обмеження, організаційні труднощі та ціннісно-мотиваційні аспекти. Для більшої достовірності результати ілюстровано прямими цитатами експертів, що дозволяє відобразити практичний вимір проблеми.

На основі аналізу експертних оцінок запропоновано напрями подолання виявлених бар'єрів, серед яких: розвиток цифрових компетентностей фахівців та клієнтів, створення інклюзивної цифрової інфраструктури, розробка навчально-методичних матеріалів для практиків соціальної роботи, підсилення міжвідомчої співпраці на місцевому рівні та інтеграція державних і регіональних програм цифрової трансформації у стратегії розвитку сільських громад.

Результати дослідження мають прикладне значення для органів місцевого самоврядування, соціальних служб, освітніх і громадських організацій, які працюють у напрямі забезпечення доступності та якості соціальних послуг у сільських громадах. Вони також можуть стати основою для вироблення національної політики цифровізації соціальної сфери з урахуванням потреб і можливостей сільських територій.

Ключові слова: соціальна робота, соціальні послуги, громада, сільська громада, цифровізація, оцінювання в соціальній роботі, цифрові компетентності.

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