

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Addressing the challenge of energy efficiency through Information and Communication Technologies'

(2009/C 76/11)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- notes that managing climate change is one of the most important political challenges facing local and regional authorities in the years ahead;
- believes that to achieve the ambitious 2020 targets it is necessary to ensure that ICT-enabled solutions are readily available and also that they are fully deployed;
- stresses that ICTs play an important role in implementing the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy. They exert a positive impact on development through new technological and commercial innovations and promote structural changes in the use of natural resources by utilising the most intelligent and cleanest processes;
- highlights the fact that the vast potential of ICTs to improve energy efficiency boosts Europe's competitiveness and increases business opportunities at local and regional level;
- points out that local and regional authorities have several instruments at their disposal which can help to exploit to the full the opportunities offered by ICT in managing climate change, such as for example responsibilities and powers in the fields of land-use planning, energy supply, construction and transport;
- proposes that in connection with a European event on energy efficiency, an exhibition and competition could be held for local and regional authorities on the best energy efficiency projects using ICTs, and is prepared to participate in both the exhibition and the event itself; and that the Commission draw up a practical guide, together with the Committee of the Regions and other stakeholders, on how local and regional authorities can exploit ICTs in their climate change plans.

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Reference document

Addressing the challenge of energy efficiency through Information and Communication Technologies
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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. notes that in its recent opinions it has identified managing climate change as one of the most important political challenges facing local and regional authorities in the years ahead;

2. supports the 2020 targets set by the Council to reduce emissions by 20 % compared to 1990 levels, to raise the share of renewable energies in overall EU energy consumption to 20 % and to achieve 20 % savings in EU energy consumption compared to projections;

3. like the Commission, believes that to achieve the ambitious 2020 targets it is necessary to ensure that ICT-enabled solutions are readily available and also that they are fully deployed;

4. reiterates its earlier stand that energy efficiency must be given priority in all European energy policy choices; is therefore pleased that the European Commission states in the communication that it wants to use ICTs to increase the efficiency of energy production, distribution and trade;

5. having drawn special attention to the social and economic dimensions of ICT in its opinions on the Commission's recent i2010 initiatives, is pleased that the Commission now takes environmental aspects of the information society into account;

6. stresses that ICTs play an important role in implementing the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy. They exert a positive impact on development through new technological and commercial innovations and promote structural changes in the use of natural resources by utilising the most intelligent and cleanest processes;

7. highlights the fact that the vast potential of ICTs to improve energy efficiency boosts Europe's competitiveness and increases business opportunities at local and regional level.

The role of local and regional authorities

8. is convinced that the Commission has made the right choice in giving priority to cooperation with and input from urban communities in validating and testing ideas and feels that this is fully consistent with the Committee's previous comments on the i2010 strategy;

9. believes that its precisely the local and regional level of administration which, because of practical needs, can come up with the most creative and innovative initiatives in support of the EU's i2010 strategy;

10. points out that local and regional authorities have several instruments at their disposal which can help to exploit to the full the opportunities offered by ICT in managing climate change, such as for example responsibilities and powers in the fields of land-use planning, energy supply, construction and transport;

11. notes that local and regional authorities already make extensive use of ICTs in many of their activities which have the effect of reducing energy consumption and emissions, such as for instance:

- lighting in public places. For example, text messages or the Internet can be used to switch on the lighting at outdoor sports facilities for a fixed period of time and street lighting can be regulated automatically in accordance with changing needs;

- regulation of heating, air conditioning and lighting in buildings. Technology has a particularly important role to play in buildings which use a lot of energy, such as swimming halls;

- remote surveillance of buildings and other public spaces. This also provides information on energy use in buildings and changes therein;

- more environmentally friendly traffic control systems, for example traffic lights which react to changes in traffic flows and systems which provide information on traffic congestion;

- making public transport more competitive. Many local authorities already offer real-time timetable updates based on positioning systems and ticket sales on the Internet;

- development of local logistics. IT can be used to combine transport operations and various mobile services within a locality, thereby reducing overall emissions, and to optimise routes in an environmentally-friendly way;
- raising consumers' awareness. Remote metering can be used to provide consumers with real-time information which, through interaction, improves energy efficiency and reduces emissions;
- energy production and distribution, where IT is already used to control processes;

12. endorses the Commission's proposal to give ICT companies the leading role at this stage in structural change aimed at reducing the ecological footprint of ICTs;

13. also draws attention to the great opportunities ICTs offer local and regional authorities to increase productivity, improve their services and at the same time reduce energy consumption and emissions. However, frequently a precondition for being able to exploit these opportunities is wider structural reform in administrative practice, such as for example:

- increasing teleworking by making work more flexible;
- switching from paper documents to electronic processing of affairs, while at the same time reforming both internal and external procedures;
- provision of a comprehensive range of services covering different sectors and organisations at one stop shops close to the public, to which more in-depth expertise and, for example, interpreting services can be delivered using video conferencing;

14. states that Europe's local and regional authorities and their networks are happy to participate in the ICT consultation and partnership process relating to energy efficiency and to disseminate good practice;

15. urges the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to devise appropriate funding models, which also take into account the needs of local and regional authorities, and to make energy efficiency in general and ICT-based solutions in particular a priority area for all sources of funding.

Other comments

16. feels that, despite the fact that several initiatives are already underway, transport should have been included in the communication as one of the areas of focus in the initial stage as it offers vast potential for energy savings and many opportunities for ICT applications and is crucial from the viewpoint of local and regional administration;

17. agrees with the Commission that it is important to support the development of computers which consume less energy and also calls on the Commission to invest in the development of methods enabling the more effective recovery of heat energy generated in large computer rooms;

18. in addition to the energy efficiency potential of ICTs highlighted by the Commission, draws attention to the major impact which the manufacture, transport and destruction of IT products has on the sector's ecological footprint and considers it important to try to influence this impact, both through voluntary agreements and, where necessary, through legislation;

19. proposes the drawing up of general guidelines on the development of research on ICT-enabled energy efficiency, so that fragmented European, national and regional resources can be combined to better serve common goals;

20. emphasises the importance of customer-driven research and believes that a precondition for its success is close cooperation between scientific research, ICT and other companies, energy producers, local and regional authorities and consumer organisations;

21. in view of the major importance of local and regional authorities for energy efficiency, urges that they be given a key role in the EU's framework research programme and in similar national framework programmes and, above all, in the large-scale pilots for tracking the ecological footprint of ICTs referred to in the communication;

22. is concerned that, despite the importance of the matter at hand, not enough has been invested in the roll-out of innovations in the form of mass market products and services, and notes that local and regional authorities, in addition to playing a pioneering role in exploiting innovations, can offer companies in the sector a positive economic environment;

23. considers the lack of common standards to be a major problem from the viewpoint of market growth, especially in technology areas closely associated with local and regional administration, such as for example smart building control systems, lighting control and traffic systems. The lack of standards prevents technical interoperability, limits market competition and hampers public procurement;

24. points out that the priority areas mentioned by the Commission lack standard measuring methods enabling local and regional authorities to evaluate the usefulness of different solutions;

25. notes that distributed energy generation at local and regional level is appropriate from the point of view of electricity generation and security and offers an opportunity to combine different means of production. Therefore it warmly endorses the Commission's plan to increase the exchange of information and good practice in new ICT-based business models for distributed generation and to invest in related research and development;

26. points out that the communication makes no mention of promoting green ICTs in public procurement and calls for the development of procedures which would make it easier than at present for local and regional authorities to give priority to energy efficiency in public procurement, especially in the pre-commercial procurement procedure, and to related ICT development;

27. welcomes the Commission's remark in the communication that it expects close cooperation with the Committee of the Regions and proposes that:

- in connection with a European event on energy efficiency, an exhibition and competition could be held for local and regional authorities on the best energy efficiency projects using ICTs, and is prepared to participate in both the exhibition and the event itself;
- the Commission draw up a practical guide, together with the Committee of the Regions and other stakeholders, on how local and regional authorities can exploit ICTs in their climate change plans;

28. proposes that in its next communication on ICTs and the environment, due in spring 2009, the Commission:

- extend the scope of the communication from energy efficiency to sustainable development;
- append to it a concrete action plan containing specific goals, measures and deadlines;
- include as new areas, at a minimum, transport and the needs for change in public administration practices;
- take into consideration the role and needs of local and regional administration.

Committee of the Regions' main views

29. As already pointed out by the Committee on previous occasions, energy efficiency and increased use of renewable energy must be a key element of European energy policy. Step-

ping up investment in ICTs that boost energy efficiency enables local and regional authorities to manage climate change, to increase distributed energy generation and to reduce energy consumption and offers new business opportunities for local companies;

30. The Committee attaches great importance to the Commission's plans to draw on the experience of urban communities in validating and testing ideas and to work together with them and existing networks of local and regional authorities. Because of their many roles (such as e.g. regulator, consumer, service provider, energy user and supplier, initiator, expert and provider of guidelines), local and regional authorities have many reasons to wholeheartedly support the full exploitation of ICT in efforts to increase energy efficiency. The Committee will endeavour to use all the means at its disposal to raise awareness of these opportunities among urban communities and networks of local and regional authorities and will encourage them to take part in the partnership process;

31. The Committee hopes that the Commission will devote more effort to establishing standards in this field so that local and regional authorities have access to products with better interoperability. Standardisation and quality criteria also help to foster competition in the market and make it easier for authorities to purchase products which have a beneficial impact on energy efficiency;

32. As part of their joint responsibility for the environment, local and regional authorities could, with the support of the EU and Member States, act as a pioneer and set examples for others by using ICTs to improve energy efficiency. This pioneering role would include establishing a new partnership with ICT companies and energy producers, making public buildings energy-smart, introducing smart lighting in public places and increasing energy efficiency in administration and service provision;

33. The Committee proposes that in its next communication on this subject the European Commission could publish the EU's action plan for using ICT to promote sustainable development. The Committee believes that it is essential that the overall analysis also cover transport and that the action plan include an extensive e-strategy for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, quantitative sectoral targets for these emissions and measures to be taken by the EU and Member States to achieve these targets and, further, that it define indicators for monitoring progress.

Brussels, 27 November 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE