

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on eEurope 2003 Final Report'

(COM(2003) 66 final)

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On 11 February 2003 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 5 June 2003. The rapporteur was Mr Koryfidis.

At its 400th plenary session on 18 and 19 June 2003 (meeting of 18 June), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion, with 75 votes in favour and one abstention.

1. Introduction

1.1. In December 1999, the European Commission launched its initiative to build the digital Europe of the 21st century with its Communication entitled 'Europe — An information society for all'.

1.2. The initiative was motivated by 'the growing realisation that the application of digital technologies has become the key factor for growth and employment, the evidence that a new economy or e-economy is emerging, mainly driven by the Internet, and the fact that, in spite of Europe's lead in certain digital technologies, e.g. mobile communications and digital TV, the uptake of computers and the Internet in Europe remains comparatively low'.

1.3. Accordingly, and after substantial discussions with the European institutions, the eEurope 2002 Action Plan was proposed by the Commission and approved by the Feira European Council in June 2000. The Action Plan also formed part of the Lisbon strategy.

1.4. The Action Plan provided for 11 action areas in which there were a total of 64 targets to be achieved before the end of 2002.

1.5. According to the present Commission Communication, progress towards achieving these targets has been monitored regularly through the benchmarking exercise based on a list of 23 sector-specific indicators, while intermediate measurements of these indicators were presented in the Commission Communications 'Impacts and Priorities' in March 2001 and 'eEurope Benchmarking Report' of February 2002.

1.6. The present Final Report on the eEurope programme 'highlights the achievements of eEurope and identifies remaining obstacles to the full development of the information society in Europe'.

1.7. The new eEurope 2005 Action Plan, which follows on from eEurope 2002, constitutes the next stage and is already underway.

2. The Final Report

2.1. According to the present report by the Commission, 'in terms of realising the targets endorsed at the Feira European Council, eEurope has been a major success. Most of the 64 targets have been achieved. Its success is due to the contributions of many actors in the European Institutions, Member States, Industry and Social Partners'.

2.2. In the words of the report, the success of eEurope chiefly lies in the fact that it has 'laid solid foundations' for achieving the prime objective of 'a competitive knowledge based economy'.

2.2.1. In this context it should be pointed out that achieving this prime objective will require time, modernisation of relevant practices, restructuring of economic conduct and organisational changes if substantial benefit is to be derived from the new technologies.

2.3. The specific results for each objective may be summarised as follows:

2.3.1. 1st objective: a cheaper and faster Internet — results

— The marginal costs of Internet access for a PC owner have become small.

— GEANT has become the fastest research network backbone in the world, offering the widest geographical coverage (32 countries).

- The new regulatory framework for electronic communications is almost entirely in place.

2.3.2. 2nd objective: investing in people and skills — results

- More than 90 % of schools and 90 % of businesses are now connected to the Internet.
- Over half of EU teachers have been formally trained in the use of computers and four in ten in how to use the Internet.
- The proportion of the working population receiving computer training increased from 23 % to 29 % between 2000 and 2001 but this increase did not continue in 2002.
- ESDIS issued a recommendation for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) to be accepted as a Europe-wide basic IT accreditation scheme.
- There has been an agreement reached by the social partners on teleworking.
- About 8 % of EU citizens use public Internet access points.
- The European Employment Strategy has already incorporated responsibility for achieving the goal of 'an information society for all', including policies to combat e-exclusion, particularly of people with special needs.

2.3.3. 3rd objective: stimulating the use of the Internet — results

- The legal framework for developing e-commerce is almost entirely in place, while non-legislative initiatives have been taken to stimulate its use, such as the e-confidence initiative, the e-commerce webpage etc.
- The Go Digital programme has already achieved considerable progress in getting SMEs online through the training support it provides them, as well as financial assistance for Internet connection and continued use thereof.
- Government on-line is a partial reality, with significant differences between countries.
- All Member States have drawn up detailed plans to implement information technology in the provision of healthcare, while the majority (78 %) of EU general practitioners are connected to the Internet.

2.3.4. The coordination and promotion of the eEurope Action Plan has mainly been through the relevant Commission website: http://europa.eu.int/information_society/index_en.htm

3. General comments

3.1. In its opinion on the eEurope Action Plan, the EESC made the following observations:

Observation 1: 'The ESC welcomes the eEurope initiative and considers it to be the most important and ambitious effort by the European Union to date to familiarise its citizens with and adapt its businesses and its public bodies as rapidly as possible to the new conditions created by the digital age and the new economy. In the Committee's view, this initiative is more than a starting point for that familiarisation and adaptation process, however; it is a buttress for the relevant processes that are already developing, though slowly, in the market and in society'.

Observation 2: 'The ESC is adamant that all the measures relating to stimulating Internet use, establishing an information society and achieving the Union's new strategic goal should focus on people and their needs, the European citizen, European society and the European economy. Provided it serves that principle, the establishment of the information society — as an antecedent to the knowledge-based society — will acquire real significance'.

Observation 3: 'The ESC is aware of the scale and number of problems associated with the development of the action plan. In particular, the Committee foresees difficulties in covering the ground and gaps that have opened up as a result of Europe's tardy response to the new technological challenges'.

Observation 4: 'For the ESC, the risk of individuals, groups or entire regions being excluded from the overall initiative is great and manifold, given that non-computerised access to universal services will gradually become obsolete as the provision of computer-based services develops. For this reason, the ESC agrees with those who support the view that the programme as a whole and the individual measures should include means of combating these risks'.

Observation 5: 'In the ESC's view, in the final analysis, the implementation of the action plan will be judged largely in terms of organisation. It is precisely on this level that the ESC agrees broadly with the Commission's approach. It agrees in principle with the objectives as they are set out, the means of tying them in with the demands of the special European Council in Lisbon, the definition of the measures and of the operators with responsibility for carrying them out, and the deadlines set'.

3.2. These and other observations by the EESC, in conjunction with the Final Report and other Commission documents on the eEurope 2002 programme, have led the Committee to the following conclusions:

3.2.1. Despite the inherent difficulties it faced, the eEurope Action Plan has largely achieved its objectives.

3.2.2. Of course, this does not mean that Europe has taken full advantage of the new digital age. But it does mean that the foundations are in place to reap the potential benefits, which are clearly not just economic in nature.

3.2.2.1. Therefore the prospects for reaping the benefits of the digital age hinge on the choices and actions taken from here on in, always as part of a process to achieve the EU's relevant strategic goal in the present decade.

3.2.2.2. On this point, the EESC would reiterate its earlier position, strongly emphasising the need to create more favourable conditions for the development of eLearning at all levels of education.

3.2.3. Based on the data given in the Final Report, the results mentioned under the 1st objective (cheaper, faster and secure Internet) may be considered satisfactory. The doubling of household Internet penetration, the new institutional framework and the reduction of access costs are certainly positive developments. Nevertheless, there is clearly a need for further reductions in access costs, certainly in broadband network environments.

3.2.3.1. Equal public participation in the information society is very closely linked with the existence of an advanced network infrastructure, of a high quality, capacity and performance. It must be rationally developed and costed, in order to provide easy, secure and continuous access to the international knowledge- and business-based economy, at a reasonable price, without false restrictions. There is an urgent need for measures, therefore, to increase the possibility of access for citizens, groups of citizens or regions of the EU which are lagging behind to a significant degree.

3.2.4. Particular attention should be focused on enhancing the prerequisites for achieving the 2nd objective (investment in people and skills). All the data points to an urgent need to intensify efforts, both as regards education and human resources currently at working age.

3.2.4.1. The serious shortfall in the digital training of the labour force (29 % in 2002) is already making it very difficult to achieve the strategic goal by the end of the decade.

3.2.4.2. Doubling the proportion of the labour force undergoing digital training may certainly provide new impetus for achieving the above-mentioned goal. The social partners, and particularly the business community, are undoubtedly a key factor in promoting such a policy. But at the same time, administrations at all levels have a fundamental responsibility for the shaping and integrated development of the institution of lifelong learning, which is increasingly bound up with the EU's broad objectives, especially that of sustainable development.

3.2.5. Stimulating the use of the Internet (3rd objective) is essential if the new benefits of the digital age are to become apparent. With considerable differences from country to country and from north to south, it is fair to say that the results achieved on the 3rd objective are unsatisfactory.

3.2.5.1. The EESC realises the difficulties involved and the importance of the time factor in promoting all these changes. However, it would emphasise the need to intensify efforts, support and pressure on the Member States — particularly those who are lagging behind — to speed up the pace of development in the areas in question and to meet the preconditions for achieving the Lisbon strategic objective by 2010.

3.2.6. Aware of the difficulties involved in developing the open method of coordination, the EESC stresses the need for more detailed and more objective integrated and ongoing benchmarking of the whole process.

3.2.6.1. The preceding point is not intended to cast doubt on the effort made by the Commission, which is, on the contrary, commendable. Its purpose is to highlight the need to create a more friendly and functional environment for developing the open method of coordination.

3.2.6.2. The EESC considers it a major omission that there is no mention in the Report of the cost of the eEurope 2002 programme, even on an objective-by-objective basis. It would emphasise that, in the interests of inter alia disseminating good practice, this kind of benchmarking exercise should include a record of both the amount of funding available for each country and for each area of action, and the way Community funds are managed.

Brussels, 18 June 2003.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Roger BRIESCH