

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'e-Inclusion'

(2008/C 172/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- expresses its conviction that a lasting digital divide causes social and economic exclusion. Achieving equal opportunities in terms of digital access and skills is a social necessity; at the same time, it also offers yet untapped economic potential. It is important to use ICT as a new 'social instrument', linking ICT strategies to Community social policy;
- calls upon Member States to step up their efforts on e-Inclusion and to draw up programmes which are specific, of well-defined duration and easy to evaluate. It emphasises participation at local and regional level in national and EU initiatives on e-inclusion and believes that it is important to stress that local and regional authorities draw up specific plans for promoting the information society at local level;
- supports efforts to raise public awareness, to increase the exchange of experience between stakeholders and to ensure active cooperation at local and regional level, involving the ICT industry, public authorities, service providers, user and social organisations, in order to achieve the maximum possible impact;
- emphasises the key role and responsibility of local and regional authorities in helping to ensure affordable broadband access in areas where the market fails, in providing leadership on pilot projects for bridging the e-Accessibility gap, and in developing new approaches of citizen-centred public e-services;
- emphasises the importance of education and training courses which are geared to the needs deriving from the ongoing digital evolution of the whole of society, paying special attention to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, economically inactive, less educated people and those who have not acquired the digital knowledge necessary for the workplace;
- calls upon the Commission to apply indicators on the regional distribution and use of ICT, to provide a continuous source of conclusions which would be useful and necessary for adopting measures to bring about socio-economic and technological convergence between the regions.

Rapporteur: Mr SZALAY (HU/ALDE), Municipal Councillor, Veszprém

Reference document

Communication from the Commission on the 'European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion — To be part of the information society'

COM (2007) 694 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. is committed to promoting and implementing sustainable social and economic cohesion, and therefore welcomes the European Commission's communication on the *European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion — 'To be part of the information society'*, which promotes e-inclusion and provides it with a new impetus. As in the case of applying, using and developing information and communication technologies (ICT), the absence of such technologies also has a spill over effect, resulting in a constant widening and deepening of the digital divide;

2. welcomes the concise nature and the clarity of the Commission's analysis in its Communication and of the strategic framework for action based on it. The CoR approves the intention to pursue a EU-wide approach to the issue ⁽¹⁾;

3. agrees with the statement that e-inclusion is a key enabler of the goals of economic and social progress of the i2010 initiative ⁽²⁾ to develop an information society for growth and jobs, and thus of the Lisbon agenda;

4. shares the view that investment in ICT provides local and regional players as well as municipalities with an important tool which they can use to deal with equal opportunities related problems in various areas; draws attention to the importance of actively involving regions and local and regional authorities in the preparation of strategies and programmes to obtain and use EU funding, given that they operate at the level which is closest to citizens, deal directly with local concerns and are sensitive to emerging needs;

5. appreciates that the document identifies areas for clear action and specific tasks for the various actors concerned with e-Inclusion — individual users, the ICT industry, service providers, public authorities and NGOs;

6. notes the initiative's support for various proposals for practical measures to develop an equitable information society set out in previous CoR opinions, on subjects such as ageing in

the information society ⁽³⁾, bridging the broadband gap and e-government ⁽⁴⁾, the demographic future of Europe ⁽⁵⁾, ICT research ⁽⁶⁾, and the situation of persons with disabilities ⁽⁷⁾;

7. acknowledges that current indicators point to a risk of not achieving the Riga targets by 2010. Efforts by the Member States remain fragmented and cooperation is lacking. The Committee therefore calls on the Member States to step up their efforts and, in future years, to draw up programmes which are specific, of well-defined duration and easy to evaluate;

8. feels that it is important to emphasise participation at local and regional level in national and EU initiatives on e-inclusion, given that this is the level where the most innovative and appropriately targeted measures to implement a digital society for all are possible;

9. believes that it is important to stress that local and regional authorities draw up specific plans for promoting the Information Society, and digital development at local level, through the implementation of 'Digital Local Agendas';

10. asks the Commission to involve the CoR fully in initiatives to revise the agreed strategy once it has been implemented;

11. wishes to be informed of the results and conclusions of the interim evaluation report on implementation of the i2010 strategy, which should be made known in good time, and to give its views on them;

12. welcomes the European Commission's 'e-Inclusion, be part of it' campaign planned for 2008, which received a substantial initial boost from the CoR's seminar on promoting e-inclusion at local and regional level, held in December 2007 in Lahti, Finland. The CoR would like to play an active part in the 2008 campaign and to help ensure that participation in public consultation is as wide-ranging as possible. In connection with this, it would emphasise its own role as a provider of impetus through the development of campaigns, strategies and programmes at local and regional level;

⁽³⁾ CdR 84/2007 fin.

⁽⁴⁾ CdR 272/2006 fin.

⁽⁵⁾ CdR 341/2006 fin.

⁽⁶⁾ CdR 155/2005 and CdR 150/2005 fin.

⁽⁷⁾ CdR 312/2003 fin.

⁽¹⁾ CdR 252/2005 fin.

⁽²⁾ COM(2005) 229 final.

13. welcomes the holding of a ministerial conference on e-inclusion in late 2008, and the presentation of a European e-Inclusion award at the conference. Stresses its willingness to take part in the work of organising the conference, including selection of candidates for the European e-Inclusion award;

14. expresses its conviction that a lasting digital divide stands in the way of creating and maintaining social cohesion and prosperity, and causes social and economic exclusion; the i2010 initiative will help to improve the quality of life for individuals and society in general;

15. agrees that achieving equal opportunities in terms of digital skills is a social necessity; at the same time, it also offers enormous and as yet untapped economic potential;

Bridging the broadband gap

16. suggests that the Commission pay special attention to the less economically developed regions, so that they can make use of the opportunities for effective convergence offered by ICT and can avoid the risks of exclusion;

17. confirms its commitment to active incorporation of objectives relating to an inclusive information society into regional development plans, and to playing an effective part in the *Regions for economic change* ⁽⁸⁾ networks;

18. agrees with the European Commission that EU structural and rural development funds must support efforts to improve broadband infrastructure and the development and use of electronic services, especially in remote and rural areas, thus reducing the disparities in the development levels of town and country;

19. feels that access to broadband at affordable prices throughout the EU is a basic prerequisite for guaranteeing the quality of public services, promoting competitiveness and productivity in the areas concerned, and enabling extensive development of the information society and knowledge;

20. emphasises the key role and responsibility of local and regional authorities in view of their involvement in providing various services and educational facilities and of their closeness to citizens; they can therefore help to ensure affordable broadband access in areas where market mechanisms are insufficient on their own. Measures by local and regional authorities can serve as examples of user-centred e-government solutions to promote digital literacy and ensure conditions which are conducive to business and research activities in the ICT field;

21. stresses that one of the main focuses of the modernisation objectives of European cohesion policy for 2007-2013 is on making Member States, regions and cities more attractive through accessibility and the provision of services which are of

an adequate standard; feels that developing e-government services supports these efforts, and helps to enrich knowledge by stimulating research and innovation capacities;

22. recalls that ICT are a key factor for improving coordination and cooperation in various fields between local, regional national and European authorities, and between them and European citizens;

Bridging the e-Accessibility gap

23. referring to the Amsterdam Treaty, which prohibits disability-related discrimination, calls for accessible public websites, and notes that much work still needs to be done before this objective can be achieved, judging by the current situation; emphasises that regions and municipalities can help to remedy these problems, not only by purchasing, developing and providing the requisite products and services, but also by encouraging the emergence of an economic environment which offers businesses better opportunities for accessing larger markets; it may thereby be necessary for local and regional authorities, also in large urban areas, to invest in ICT and infrastructure expansion;

24. agrees with the European Commission that local and regional authorities must provide leadership on pilot projects;

25. shares the view that those in charge of developing and managing public services also need new competence building programmes to enable implementation of the measures set out in the action plan;

Tackling the digital competences gap

26. feels that there is still a significant digital competences gap, affecting, in particular, the elderly, economically inactive, less educated people and those who have not acquired the digital knowledge necessary for developing their digital skills in the workplace

27. welcomes the Commission's plan for 2008 to carry out an EU-wide study on digital competences, and to provide guidance on digital competences policy for the most vulnerable groups by the end of 2008;

28. emphasises the importance of education and training courses which are geared to the needs deriving from the ongoing digital evolution of the whole of society, paying special attention to vulnerable groups;

29. agrees that the role and responsibility of authorities at all levels of government in helping to ensure digital skills is crucial, and supports active participation and cooperation by industry and social organisations in achieving this objective;

⁽⁸⁾ COM(2006) 675 final.

Modern public e-services

30. ICT provide a major opportunity to improve public services. The Committee agrees that developing and propagating ICT could provide an opportunity for European cities to consolidate their role as drivers of development, centres of knowledge, and genuine incubators of innovative services and associated knowledge;

31. feels that if the aim is to link development of ICT to consolidation of the role played by European cities, it is above all vital to strengthen the role of local and regional authorities, enabling them to pursue strategies to preserve and promote competitiveness;

32. emphasises the importance of a new approach to providing citizen-centred public e-services, and draws attention to the role of local and regional authorities, which are responsible for developing such an approach. This is a task of particular relevance to remote, outermost and rural regions and island communities where the socio-economic benefits of developing ICT are vital for cohesion and offer the greatest added value;

33. recognises that promoting e-inclusion at local and regional levels can enhance the quality of life, boost participation in local community life, and act as a catalyst for competitiveness, business start ups, and the development of better, more effective and more personalised public and private services;

34. calls for the reinforcement and new impetus to be given to prevent, tackle and resolve network and information security problems in good time, a task which is promoted by the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA);

ICT solutions for the socially disadvantaged and groups at risk of exclusion

35. in anticipation of demographic change, feels that it is desirable and necessary to put in place and develop conditions for telemedicine⁽⁹⁾; this can help to improve healthcare and support the elderly in living independently, enjoying an enhanced quality of life and integrating into society, so that it can benefit from their accumulated experience and knowledge. In addition, more widespread use of ICT might help to enhance existing ICT-based health services and facilitate the establishment of new products and services, thereby helping to improve people's overall health, give them better access to public health services, and generate long-term savings in the costs of social security systems;

36. taking into account the needs of the market, emphasises the importance of developing and providing products and services which meet the actual needs of those concerned; In view of this, calls for the alignment of divergent regulatory systems and, with regard to technologies, advocates using mainstream solutions;

37. recommends that ICT services for the elderly be given greater emphasis in the *Regions for economic change* initiative;

38. welcomes the emphasis in research programmes (the Seventh Framework Programme, ICT Policy Support Programme) on e-inclusion as a means of addressing ageing and disability issues;

39. continues to point out the need to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity;

40. points out the need for digitalisation of the written European cultural heritage so that it can be preserved for future generations. This effort must be made in all languages, for all regions and for all countries of Europe⁽¹⁰⁾;

Integrating e-Inclusion actions to maximise lasting impact

41. places particular emphasis on close professional cooperation and partnership between stakeholders;

42. stresses that consistent and coordinated dismantling of regulatory, technical and other barriers is crucial if e-Inclusion is to be fully sustainable and effective;

43. emphasises the need for involvement by local and regional authorities not only in the implementation of strategies, but also in their formulation; this will help to ensure close contacts and communication with stakeholders and to make programmes more effective;

44. strongly supports the approach advocated by the European Commission to increasing the volume and quality of ICT research in Europe. Besides research and development, emphasis is also needed on mechanisms to promote the dissemination of specific research findings throughout European industry;

45. is pleased that rich information content, interoperability and security of transactions are priorities for research programmes;

46. agrees with the importance of using ICT as a new 'social instrument'. To this end, ICT strategies must be linked to Community social policy;

⁽⁹⁾ CdR 256/2004 fin.

⁽¹⁰⁾ CdR 32/2006 fin.

47. emphasises the need to develop fundamental measures in areas which are horizontal priorities to promote equal opportunities (e.g. making public websites universally accessible, developing broadband infrastructure); state intervention is essential here;

48. acknowledges that an EU-level policy on e-Inclusion offers added value (coordination, cooperation, forum, partnership, funding); agrees that there is a need for greater transparency in this field and for increased awareness of social responsibility;

49. is in favour of a continuous and wide-ranging exchange of information, best practices and experience between stakeholders; also supports efforts to raise public awareness and ensure active cooperation at local and regional level; such cooperation should involve the ICT industry, public authorities, public and private service providers, and organisations repre-

senting end users, in order to achieve the maximum possible impact;

50. also feels that it is important to create an EU-wide regional network which could be used to give regions more and better opportunities to participate in collaborative projects.

51. emphasises that e-inclusion is a triple-win situation in that it benefits industry, users and society as a whole;

52. recommends that the Commission promote the formulation and application of indicators for comparative representation and evaluation of the regional distribution and use of ICT, to provide a continuous source of conclusions which would be useful and necessary for adopting measures to bring about socio-economic and technological convergence between the regions.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

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