

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Development of rural areas by means of a proactive policy on information and communications technologies'

(2002/C 107/06)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the decision taken by its Bureau on 13 February 2001, in accordance with the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the EC Treaty, to issue an opinion on 'The development of rural areas by means of a proactive policy on information and communications technologies' and to instruct Commission 2 for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries to undertake the preparatory work;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 57/2001 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 2 on 9 October 2001 (rapporteur: Mr Lebrun, Member of the Walloon Parliament and of the Parliament of the French-speaking Community of Belgium and First Alderman of Viroinval, Walloon Government B/EPP);

having regard to the Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2000 on unbundled access to the local loop (Regulation (EC) No. 2887/2000);

having regard to the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council of 12 July 2000 on 'universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services' (COM(2000) 392 final);

having regard to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council on 'universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services' (CES 229/2001);

having regard to the European Commission Communication of 31 January 2001 on 'The regions and the new economy — Guidelines for innovative actions under the ERDF in 2000-2006' (COM(2001) 60 final),

adopted the following opinion, by a unanimous vote, at its 41st plenary session held on 14 and 15 November 2001 (meeting of 15 November).

The Committee of the Regions

1. takes the view that, as talented people are now being attracted to jobs in geographical locations which offer a high quality of life, we must make optimal use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in order to stem rural depopulation and avoid the economic and social costs traditionally associated with that phenomenon;

2. highlights the need to establish an appropriate range of ICT services in rural areas in order to overcome a number of structural difficulties. Examples are:

- more effective emergency medical services (e.g. telemedicine involving distance diagnoses); other services could also be included, such as distance x-ray examinations and distance use of scanners and medical imaging);
- distance help and back-up services for categories of people who require assistance because of their age, state of health or particular handicaps;
- distance training activities ('e-learning'), for example in connection with the on-going training required for the establishment of the information society, in which knowledge sharing has to go hand-in-hand with technological innovation;

- specific cultural and tourism activities designed to enhance the identity and the attractions of each of the regions concerned;

- online administrative services;

3. urges that a clear distinction be drawn between: (a) measures to stimulate demand which can be met and which can extract a profit from investments under public-private partnerships with a view to providing an appropriate range of ICT services and (b) measures which directly contribute to the establishment of telecommunications infrastructures catering for the specific requirements of rural areas;

4. points out that, in the context of the measures set out under (a) above, the establishment of fixed or mobile telecommunications infrastructures for high-output data-transmission is only feasible if a demand, which can be met, for services and content in the regions concerned has been demonstrated in advance;

5. urges, with this aim in view, that steps be taken to identify and stimulate such a demand for ICT services which caters for the specific economic, social, political and cultural features of rural areas;

6. highlights the demand for access to advice from experts in specific sectors (agriculture or fisheries, for example); in this context pilot schemes and experimental measures should be set up or promoted; particular attention should be paid to older people in rural areas, with the main emphasis being placed on those working in agriculture and forestry;

7. would like to encourage, via ICT services, the development of active cooperation between regional players in the market and non-market sectors, with a view to achieving an adequate critical mass in respect of these activities;

8. would like to step up the exchange of development experience related specifically to rural areas, with a view to promoting understanding of the entire process of identifying needs and associated costs. To this end, the emphasis should be placed on, for example, the nature of the technical, financial and human resources used and the acceptability of the proposed technologies;

9. urges that the goal should be to establish in due course an analysis model for describing and comparing the various experiences, irrespective of whether they have been successes or failures. This could take the form of a database covering these experiences, geared to the specific context of each of the rural areas concerned; this database should be backed up by regular seminars for the exchange of experience and by the establishment of a network based on a real community of interest;

10. notes that the establishment of fixed telecommunications networks for high-output data-transmission (fibre optics, cables) in rural areas continues to be highly unlikely in view of the associated financial and economic constraints, but notes that, however, 2.5G and 3G type digital mobile technologies may well offer a means of reducing geographical disparities with regard to access to medium and high-output data-transmission;

11. points out that the attitude adopted by the Member States in seeking to maximise Exchequer revenue when awarding UMTS licences may lead operators to concentrate networks around urban areas, to the detriment of rural areas;

12. proposes, with a view to ensuring that the coverage requirements specified in UMTS licences are respected, that the future universal service obligations which may be imposed

on mobile operators in Europe, be extended and that current 2G networks be made inter-operable with future UMTS systems (roaming);

13. also urges that: arrangements be introduced for sharing 3G infrastructures; that such arrangements be consistent with EU competition law; that technical and economic appraisals be undertaken of the different types of access infrastructure in rural areas; and that deployment strategies geared to regional profiles be pinpointed;

14. proposes that the impact in rural areas of legislation on the liberalisation of the local loop be assessed⁽¹⁾; that the universal service obligations⁽²⁾ be interpreted in the context of rural areas, particularly Chapter II, Article 4(2) on 'connection ... at data rates that are sufficient to permit Internet access';

15. calls for account to be taken of the ESC opinion on the draft Directive of the European Parliament and the Council on universal service and the users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and service⁽³⁾;

16. urges that initiatives in the fields of content and application services be adjusted to the requirements of rural areas, by stepping up participation in horizontal measures, such as the e-Europe-Regio programme, through back-up rural development measures introduced under the EAGGF and innovative actions under the ERDF in the period 2000-2006⁽⁴⁾ and through participation in sectoral programmes in transport (Galileo, Intelligent Transport Systems), multilingual digital contents (e-Content) and health (Health-Online); considers that, in the context of the various existing programmes which could be used for this purpose, it is vitally important to plan and finance computer-literacy schemes in all types and levels of school in rural areas, the establishment of telecentres open to the public, and the holding of courses for farmers, and that specific quotas should be set aside for these schemes within vocational training programmes; calls upon the Member States to undertake to provide financial support for areas and/or regions lagging behind, to a considerable extent, as regards the introduction of information technologies.

⁽¹⁾ Regulation (EC) No 2887/2000 of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2000 on unbundled access to the local loop — OJ L 336, 30.12.2000.

⁽²⁾ COM(2000) 392, 12.7.2000.

⁽³⁾ CES 229/2001 — 2000/0183 COD, 1.3.2001.

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2001) 60 final.

Brussels, 15 November 2001.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Jos CHABERT