

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: i2010 eGovernment Action Plan — Accelerating eGovernment in Europe for the Benefit of All

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(2006/C 325/19)

On 25 April 2006 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the EESC's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 10 November 2006. The rapporteur was Mr Hernández Bataller.

At its 431st plenary session held on 13 and 14 December 2006 (meeting of 14 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 114 votes to one with two abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC endorses the Action Plan presented by the Commission, because its implementation will mean public administrations in the EU promoting a knowledge-based economy which generates sustainable economic growth, in conjunction with a qualitative and quantitative improvement in employment and greater social cohesion.

1.2 The EESC considers that implementing the Action Plan could help to prevent the marginalisation — in both personal and employment terms — of different social groups and improve the quality and stability of employment, combat digital inequality, promote universal availability of local services, fully meet the needs of weaker groups and lastly improve social cohesion in the face of inequalities now being seen for the first time. The appropriate measures should be taken to prevent people becoming 'second-class citizens'.

1.3 Public authorities switching to digital services will have to modernise, by improving the quality, flexibility and quantity of the services they deliver, aiming for efficient use of public resources, cost-cutting, user satisfaction, coordination between public administrations and less bureaucracy.

1.4 The EESC strongly recommends establishing objectives intended to meet the criterion of full coverage as regards broadband access and to encourage use of the Internet as an information and communication tool. Public confidence in this tool will depend on the degree of security that can be guaranteed for its use, which will affect e-government and the services that this can deliver to the public.

1.5 The EESC regrets the fact that the Action Plan makes no reference at all to the role of organised civil society in achieving the goals of public participation in democratic decision-making. Organised civil society, as the lynchpin of participatory democracy, must play a key role in the 'digital democracy' of the future.

2. Commission proposal

2.1 With this document, the Commission presents its eGovernment Action Plan, an integral part of its i2010 initiative for jobs and growth in the information society, to make a major contribution to the Lisbon Agenda and other European Community policies.

2.2 It considers it important to accelerate eGovernment with a view to modernisation and innovation, since new needs and demands are arising, such as for seamless public services across borders to increase citizens' opportunities for mobility and for business in Europe.

2.3 With this Action Plan the Commission seeks to:

- accelerate the delivery of tangible benefits for all citizens and businesses;
- ensure that eGovernment at national level does not lead to new barriers on the single market due to fragmentation and lack of interoperability;
- extend the benefits of eGovernment at EU level by allowing economies of scale in Member States' initiatives and cooperating on common European challenges;
- ensure cooperation of all stakeholders in the EU in designing and delivering eGovernment.

2.4 The Action Plan focuses on five major objectives for eGovernment with specific objectives for 2010:

- advancing inclusion through eGovernment so that by 2010 all citizens benefit from trusted, innovative services and easy access for all.

This presents the challenge of fighting the digital divide and an opportunity for ICT-enabled inclusive policies, to enable all citizens, including socially disadvantaged groups, to fully benefit.

- making efficiency and effectiveness a reality, significantly contributing, by 2010, to high user satisfaction, transparency and accountability, a lighter administrative burden and efficiency gains.

To this end, the Commission hopes to establish a common impact/benefit-oriented measurement framework, which includes benchmarking using common indicators (measured nationally or by European-level action) and case-based learning using measurable indicators.

It also intends to communicate and share experiences much more, to ensure long-term sustainability.

- implementing high-impact key services for citizens and businesses, so that by 2010, 100 % of public procurement will be available electronically, with 50 % actual usage, with agreement on cooperation on further high-impact online citizen services, such as citizen mobility services (improved job search services across Europe, social security services relating to patient records and electronic health prescriptions, for example) or VAT refunding;
- putting key enablers in place that enable citizens and businesses to benefit, by 2010, from convenient, secure and interoperable authenticated access across Europe to public services, such as harmonised national ID cards or the creation of regulatory measures for the development of electronic identification and authentication for public services;
- demonstrating, by 2010, tools for effective public debate and participation in democratic decision-making, addressing many questions and concerns, from inclusion to the quality of decision-making.

3. General comments

3.1 Generally speaking, the Committee welcomes the Commission's Action Plan, which contains some objectives that are ambitious and which really must be achieved. The Committee agrees with the definition of its objectives and welcomes its political timeliness, because it will give a boost to the objectives set out in the Lisbon Strategy, to ensure that Europe becomes the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

3.2 The EESC reiterates ⁽¹⁾ that if the Lisbon objectives are to become realistically attainable, the European Union must offer a coherent, dynamic and progressive approach both in terms of

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on *Improving the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy*. OJ C 120 of 20.5.2005, pp. 79-88, adopted at the plenary session held on 27.10.2004. Rapporteur: Mr Vever; co-rapporteurs: Mr Ehnmark and Mr Simpson.

objectives for the Union and in terms of institutional dynamics. The boost given by e-government is, of course, a useful contribution to attaining these objectives.

3.3 Achieving universal broadband access is a priority and infrastructure must thus be improved in areas where demand is not being met, in order to ensure access to these services and to foster the use of broadband and mobile services.

3.4 Implementing the measures set out in the Action Plan at the different territorial levels and pooling these experiences will clearly have repercussions for the operation of the internal market, in particular as regards public contracts and those day-to-day aspects of EU citizenship that will enhance the European public's quality of life and wellbeing.

3.4.1 The Action Plan is concerned with the fundamental rights set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, such as 'good administration', the 'protection of personal data', 'the right of access to placement services', 'health care' and 'access to services of general interest'.

3.4.2 The EESC hopes that implementing the Action Plan's objectives will safeguard current levels of protection and prevent further technological development eroding protection of these rights.

3.5 A number of security measures are required, in order to increase public confidence in government. These measures must be proportionate, sufficient and in line with the cost, nature and importance of the data and the operations protected.

3.6 The EESC has already stated its views on the need for a European policy approach to network and information security ⁽²⁾, and considers that investment in improved network security generates social costs and benefits which are not adequately reflected in market prices.

3.7 The EESC will in the near future present a more detailed analysis of network security in the i2010 Action Plan ⁽³⁾.

3.8 Channels of 'cooperation' between the EU institutions and the public administrations in the Member States to ensure the Action Plan's future operability must be strengthened, by establishing appropriate channels that will also help to effectively evaluate results.

3.9 It would be useful to establish bodies for cooperation between different public administrations so that the public can access new services irrespective of which administration delivers them. This would also enable them to develop joint applications and to better integrate existing solutions.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on network and information security: proposal for a European policy approach. OJ C 48 of 21.2.2002, pp. 33-41, adopted at the plenary session held on 28.11.2001. Rapporteur: Mr Retureau. Point 3.2.1.3.11.

⁽³⁾ Draft opinion OJ C 318, 23.12.2006 (TEN/254). Rapporteur: Mr Pezzini.

3.10 The EESC reiterates the need for a boost to be given at European level to European public services⁽⁴⁾ (including customs, Galileo, the European health card and judicial cooperation in civil matters, such as the taking of evidence and the service of documents, and other new services such as the European vehicle registration and the European driving licence), thus bringing the different public administrations together in these sectors.

3.11 One of the Action Plan's shortcomings is the dearth of supranational economic instruments (IST, IDA) facilitating the human and technological exchanges it proposes. This matter is particularly pressing for the new Member States and those negotiating future EU membership.

3.12 Against this background and in order to avoid a situation of EU Member States progressing at different speeds on the matter of e-government, an ad hoc institutional initiative should first be drawn up, to consider the idea of setting up a fund for modernising these public administrations and the issue of differentiated legal treatment — with longer deadlines for implementation — to ensure that these administrations comply with the objectives set out in the Plan.

3.13 The EIB and the Commission should also consider economic instruments to boost the European economy in the context of implementing this Action Plan.

4. Specific comments

4.1 Increasing IT use throughout society is a challenge for development and competitiveness but also for social and territorial cohesion and equal opportunities. One of the inequalities that has the greatest impact on the future of individuals or regions is the 'digital divide'.

4.2 The priority must be to prevent, reduce or completely eradicate the 'digital divide'. This will require immediate and active policies to promote or provide digital services, especially in areas lagging behind in the new technological environment. In conjunction, intensive IT literacy programmes including vocational training should be provided for specific social groups.

4.3 The EESC considers that all the necessary infrastructure and resources, including human resources, should be put in place, managed, developed and maintained to support the work of the various public administrations on ICT training and capacity building, in order to develop an efficient organisation across the EU. This would help to promote and enhance digital literacy and to encourage Internet use.

4.3.1 Increasing digital literacy will require measures such as setting up and properly managing fully-equipped and fully operational class-rooms for teaching digital literacy courses, teacher training, aid for getting connected, or 'surfing' vouchers for successful students, which can be used to partially fund the

acquisition of and access to ICT goods and services, specifically the Internet.

4.3.2 ICT literacy content and services should be based on the design setting up and monitoring of training and support measures for Internet courses.

4.3.3 Support should be given to measures such as the development of 'virtual campuses' for average-level Internet users and the provision of multilingual educational content for this target group. Public administrations' digital services can promote linguistic diversity and language learning and foster multilingualism in the EU.

4.4 Public administrations' web portals should be brought into line with the highest internationally accepted standards for accessibility. Primarily, this means adhering to the highest Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) standards, and also promoting all types of legislative, technological and organisational measure that make ICT accessible and public administrations throughout the European Union interoperable.

4.5 Breaking down the psychological barriers that sometimes divide people must go hand in hand with breaking down physical barriers. It is the EESC's view that access to both physical areas and communication systems and media and the legal recognition of sign language are crucial steps now being taken in this process of opening government up to everyone in Europe.

4.6 Transparency means promoting the free flow of information, guaranteeing objectivity, providing accurate and timely information and avoiding any possibility of lack of transparency in administrations' activities.

4.7 Relevant and up-to-date public information lies at the heart of the democratic relationship between government and the public at large. This is the only way in which people can know what government is doing, participate in decision-making and evaluate management and performance.

4.8 Ultimately, the issue is to channel all ICT potential into ensuring a better form of government that is more efficient and closer to the people and which delivers useful and high-quality digital services, bringing individuals and businesses into the information society.

4.9 The minimum that these measures should achieve, in all Member States and within a reasonable period of time, is to:

- guarantee the right of individuals and businesses to deal with public administrations electronically;
- establish mechanisms ensuring that online service supply meets demand, creating a comprehensive catalogue of the electronic services available;

⁽⁴⁾ Opinion OJ C 318, 23.12.2006, adopted at the plenary session held on 14.9.2006. Rapporteur: Mr Vever.

— guarantee the existence of appropriate channels for ensuring that individuals and businesses are able to make use of the services provided by public administrations.

4.10 In many cases, technological immersion will have to be provided for EU businesses, especially SMEs, by using 'technology development agents' to implement technical measures and provide specialist, tailor-made advice to the EU's business sectors, especially those lagging furthest behind as regards ICT, and by setting up 'technology development agencies', at national, regional and local level.

4.11 Measures of this nature must be backed up by other measures to disseminate these technologies, involving ICT training and capacity-building measures and incentives for SMEs to make use of high-quality Internet access and ICT in general.

4.12 Measures to boost ICT can help to integrate the EU's SMEs into the knowledge-based economy, by promoting the creation of innovative production environments, making business networks more dynamic and efficiently generating, pooling and transferring technology and knowledge.

4.13 Generating technological or management solutions relevant to the EU's production sectors can be given a tangible boost by: a) using benchmarking to evaluate the degree of ICT development in the various production sectors; b) establishing joint technology or process development centres (sectoral ICT solution clusters); c) creating service provision centres for SMEs in different production sectors, linking these to R+D and innovation in ICT (sectoral ICT workshops); d) boosting B2B and B2C business networks; e) boosting ICT risk-capital financing mechanisms and similar instruments; f) creating websites containing a list of services available to subscribing sectors and businesses; and g) setting up online digital forums and directories for SMEs.

4.14 Support should be given to the establishment of centres specialising in prevention, problem-solving, early recognition and proactive handling of security problems, as well as computer-security and ICT-related research, development and innovation, offering solutions specifically geared to EU businesses and administrations in order to build confidence in the network and to boost e-commerce and e-government.

4.15 Political parties and organised civil society are already able to communicate with the public rapidly and effectively, and

they call on their respective governments to adopt new measures to make the new communication media, in particular the Internet, a normal means of accessing and dealing with government, of participating directly in collective decision-making, of exercising political rights and, depending on the circumstances, even voting.

4.16 The EESC regrets the fact that the Action Plan makes no reference to the role of organised civil society in achieving its objectives, in particular that of improving democratic participation and decision-making in Europe.

4.17 The EESC intends to support, monitor and check, at European level, the initiative to promote inclusive access and to overcome the 'digital divide' and technological lag that can prevent the introduction of e-government in some sectors of society.

4.18 To achieve this goal, reforms must be promoted to encourage the smooth flow of information, network communication and direct dialogue between the public and government, increasing social and democratic capital and enhancing common digital sites.

4.19 The quality of democracy depends largely on how well government works. Government must be modern and flexible and structured in line with the problems facing the public, in order to be able to anticipate and solve these problems. The workings of government must be transparent, to inspire public confidence in it and a sense of government being close to the people.

4.19.1 As an advocate of participatory democracy, the EESC considers that this participation promotes civic education, facilitates governance and improves the health of the political system.

4.19.2 The current state of the technology- and knowledge-based society and its development must be thoroughly assessed, using rigorous scientific and statistical analysis, paying particular attention to the technological immersion of authorities with special needs, in order to clearly determine what measures should be adopted to close the digital divide efficiently, contributing to the intensive use and application of ICT in European society at large and between authorities of this type in particular.

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