Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Ageing well in the information society'

(2008/C 53/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— urges local and regional authorities in Europe to make extensive use of ICT opportunities to meet the challenges of an ageing population and thus improve the quality of life of older people, keep them integrated with local communities and promote local and regional competitiveness through the provision of personalised services;

— calls for local and regional authorities to be given a major role in designing national and EU research programmes and activities geared to ICT solutions for ageing in recognition of the fact that the effects of population ageing are most evident at local level and that local and regional authorities are major users of these solutions;

— urges local and regional authorities to disseminate information on the subject, draw up strategies on organising service provision under the new circumstances and increase the local partnership between the various stakeholders;

— believes that promoting independent living and remote health monitoring by ICT should improve the productivity of social and healthcare services and give professionals more time to perform the tasks for which they are trained. Technology should be adapted to the needs of the elderly and not vice versa. It must not lead to increased loneliness and respect privacy and dignity of older people;

— notes the narrow focus of the Action Plan in examining eLearning; there is a need to take on board the fact that technology-assisted learning has made an important contribution to helping older people remain creative and socially active;

— agrees that differences in the way Member States apply the provisions related to disability in electronic communications impede access to communication services and fragment the European technology market.

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Reference document	
Communication of the European Commission on *Ageing well in the information society — an i2010 initiative: Action Plan on information and communication technologies and ageing*	
COM(2007) 332 final	

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1.   considers the Action Plan on ageing well in the information society to be a very important step in the development of the European information society. Investment in ICT provides a key tool for regions and cities in their efforts to tackle the challenge of population ageing. Such investment can enhance older people's quality of life, support their social inclusion, enable them to contribute their accumulated experience and skills to the development of society and stimulate competitiveness and growth at local and regional level through new products and services. In an earlier opinion on the i2010 strategy for a European information society, the Committee welcomed the identification of the needs of the ageing society as one of the three key priorities of the strategy ([1]);

2.   notes that the communication and the Action Plan also support the proposals put forward in the Committee's opinions on, inter alia, the demographic future of Europe ([2]), practical measures relating to an equitable information society ([3]), ICT research ([4]), employment of older workers ([5]) and the position of people with disabilities ([6]);

3.   stresses that local and regional authorities have a major interest and role in all the areas covered by the Commission's Action Plan:

— Ageing well at work. Local and regional authorities are a major employer and the age structure of their workforce is often more diversified and older than in the private sector, which is why it is essential that they take part in the European projects mentioned in the Action Plan and also implement similar measures at local level.

— Ageing well in the community and at home. Local and regional authorities are the main providers of public health and social services. Whilst ageing increases the demand for these services and changes their content, it also reduces the availability of skilled labour needed for the delivery of these services. Information technology has an important role in finding solutions to these challenges. Only a small fraction

of this potential has been tapped and particularly support for independent living at home, increasing clients' active involvement in their own healthcare and enhancing the effectiveness of service provision are priority areas for further development in the future;

4.   emphasises the major disparities which exist between regions in Europe and draws attention to the problems faced by local and regional authorities, particularly in areas where the out-migration of young people is causing the average age to rise faster than elsewhere;

5.   points out that variation in Internet use in Europe is due, in very large part, to differences relating to wealth, skills and place of residence, which are not directly the result of ageing but which are more pronounced among the elderly. Increasing opportunities at local level to implement training, broadband and other general projects promoting an equitable information society can also help to improve the situation of the elderly;

6.   agrees with the Commission that the ICT market for ageing-related products and services is still in its infancy. It is important for the competitiveness of the EU that European companies quickly gain a leading position in this rapidly growing market;

Raising awareness and building common strategies

7.   supports the exchange of policies and practical experiences, dissemination of best practice, benchmarking across the Member States' regions and cities and, in particular, the creation of a Europe-wide regional network which could be used to increase and improve regions' opportunities to take part in cooperation projects. Regions and cities already have their own experience to offer to networks, especially in the areas of telemedicine and services and technologies supporting independent living;

8.   recalls that those responsible for developing and managing public services also need new skills development programmes, incorporating the different viewpoints, so that the measures presented in the Action Plan can be implemented;

([1]) CdR 252/2005 fin.
([2]) CdR 341/2006 fin.
([3]) CdR 272/2006 fin, CdR 252/2005 fin, CdR 256/2004 fin, CdR 193/2004 fin, CdR 136/2002 fin and CdR 303/2000 fin.
([4]) CdR 155/2005 and CdR 150/2005 fin.
([5]) CdR 151/2004 fin.
([6]) CdR 312/2003 fin.

Putting the enabling conditions in place

9.   notes that to increase the employment rate of older workers it is essential to promote more flexible working arrangements, good work-life balance, appropriate health and safety conditions at work and lifelong learning. Thus the Committee of the Regions endorses the Commission's view that innovative ICT solutions supporting, for example, teleworking and training, are key ways of achieving the goals of these new working life patterns;

10.   supports the Commission's plan to review policies to promote digital competencies in 2007-2008. One priority should be to help local and regional authorities in their efforts to make optimal use of the Structural Funds and, inter alia, the Lifelong Learning Programme to develop the competencies of elderly people and benefit from the good experience gained with peer training among older people;

11.   draws attention to how the information society (particularly mobile phones and the Internet) has changed language, culture, the media and society as a whole. Thus the problem of the digital divide is far more than just about opportunities to use a computer. Joint projects involving the elderly and young people might be one way to help bridge the divide;

12.   stresses that, despite the interoperability problems and differences in the provision of healthcare and home care services mentioned in the communication, the potential for the development and take-up of European products, for example in smart homes applications, is already good;

13.   considers it important that the various stakeholders (including the elderly themselves and social and healthcare service providers) can establish a common position and thus remove legal, technical, accessibility and other barriers hampering the development of ICT solutions for ageing well;

Promoting take-up

14.   shares the Commission's concern that currently not enough is being done to ensure that technological innovations are transformed into practical and affordable products. Regions and cities can help remedy this situation, not only by procuring and developing these products but also by fostering an economic environment which gives businesses better opportunities to access bigger markets;

15.   particularly welcomes the specific mention in the Action Plan to the effect that pilot projects should also be led by local and regional authorities;

16.   supports the Commission's plans to encourage government, at local, regional and national level, to exploit the potential of innovative public procurement, but would point out that local and regional authorities need to be provided with clear procedures on how innovative procurement is to be conducted within the framework of general public procurement rules;

Preparing for the future

17.   notes that it wholeheartedly supports the significant boost given to multidisciplinary research on ageing in the 7th Research Framework Programme;

18.   believes that the focus of the Action Plan on shared research, pooling of resources and common agendas well reflects the Committee's previous calls for enhancing the coordination of national research programmes on ageing at European level through interregional cooperation under a reinforced ERA-NET scheme;

19.   stresses that close cooperation between researchers, companies of different size, the third sector, local and regional authorities and, in particular, older people is a prerequisite for the success of research and development in the area of ICT solutions for ageing;

20.   recalls that local and regional authorities can create an innovative research environment and explore new avenues for institutional cooperation between the public and private sectors and cross-border regional cooperation. In addition to investment by local and regional authorities, this also requires financial support from Member States and the EU;

Committee of the Regions' main views

21.   believes that more information is needed on the large disparities that exist between regions so as to be able to draw the right conclusions and ensure that sufficiently effective measures are taken;

22.   notes the narrow focus of the communication in examining ICT-enhanced learning (eLearning), which it approaches largely from the viewpoint of the developing the world of work. In preparing for the implementation of the Action Plan, there is a need to take on board the fact that in many countries retired people are already a large client group for adult education provided by local and regional authorities and that technology-assisted learning has made an important contribution to helping older people remain creative and socially active;

23.   recommends that ICT services for older people be given a more prominent role in the Regions for Economic Change initiative;

24.   calls for local and regional authorities to be given a major role in designing national and EU research programmes and activities geared to ICT solutions for ageing in recognition of the fact that the effects of population ageing are most evident at local level and that local and regional authorities are major users of these solutions;

25.   believes it is vital in selecting the projects mentioned in the Action Plan for promoting independent living and remote health monitoring that the following criteria are also taken into account:

— support for independent living must not lead to increased loneliness;

— technology should be adapted to the needs of the elderly and not vice versa;

— the services developed must respect the privacy and dignity of older people;

— the projects must be able to improve the productivity of services and give social and healthcare professionals more time to perform the tasks for which they are trained;

26.   agrees with the Commission's assertion that differences in the way Member States apply the provisions related to disability in the regulatory framework for electronic communications impede access to communication services and fragment the European technology market, but at the same time stresses that people with disabilities must not be left to rely solely on electronic services; rather, the focus must be on harnessing technology to support access to services through many different channels;

27.   recalls that ICT development offers a chance to reconcile the needs of older people to have access to information and communication services, and of young people to seek job opportunities that contribute to dialogue between the generations;

28.   would moreover recall that, irrespective of or in addition to, EU financial or other programmes, local and regional authorities should:

— set up their own schemes and pilot projects for the development, take-up and use of ICT for ageing well;

— use other available instruments, such as voluntary guidelines, to promote the conversion of homes so that they are suitable for independent living; and

— otherwise promote widespread cooperation in social, healthcare and housing services at local and regional level;

29.   urges local and regional authorities to disseminate information on the subject, draw up strategies on the effects of ageing and on organising service provision under the new circumstances and, as mentioned in the Action Plan, increase the local partnership between the various stakeholders;

30.   urges local and regional authorities in Europe to make extensive use of ICT opportunities to meet the challenges of an ageing population and thus improve the quality of life of older people, keep them integrated with local communities and promote local and regional competitiveness through the provision of personalised services.

Brussels, 28 November 2007.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
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