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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion

"To be part of the information society"

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become of key importance for many people throughout Europe. Active use of ICT often means better prospects for work, information or social relations for individuals. ICT helps to realise major advances in social services, healthcare or education, is a major contributor to productivity growth, and opens up many business opportunities.

e-Inclusion refers to the actions to realise an inclusive information society, that is, an **information society for all**. The aim is to enable every person who so wishes to fully participate in the information society, despite individual or social disadvantages. e-Inclusion is necessary for social justice, ensuring equity in the knowledge society. It is also necessary on economic grounds, to fully realise the potential of the information society for productivity growth and reduce the cost of social and economic exclusion. Finally an inclusive information society brings large market opportunities for the ICT sector.

e-Inclusion is a key enabler of the goals of economic and social progress of the i2010 initiative *an information society for growth and jobs*¹, and thus of the Lisbon agenda. Indeed, bridging broadband and accessibility gaps, or improving digital competences, translates into new jobs and services. Initial estimates indicate that benefits from e-Inclusion in the EU could be in the order of €35 to €85 billion over five years.

The importance of e-Inclusion was recognised in i2010 and Member States, the European Commission, industry, and NGOs representing users have undertaken several actions to advance e-Inclusion. A landmark was the 2006 Ministerial “Riga Declaration” on ICT for an inclusive information society², which set concrete targets for Internet usage and availability, digital literacy, and accessibility of ICT by 2010.

However, despite all these valuable initiatives, progress is still lacking and most of Riga targets may not be achieved. Fragmentation of efforts and lack of collaboration continue to persist.

Given the importance of ICT, this failure to access or use ICT increasingly constitutes a major form of social and economic exclusion. **Persistent digital divides affect cohesion and prosperity.**

Therefore much more must be done to achieve e-Inclusion and realise the Riga targets. EU intervention is justified to guarantee equal rights in the information society, internal market coherence and e-Inclusion co-ordination actions.

Firstly, the visibility of e-Inclusion should be increased and the level of political and stakeholder commitment should be raised. Secondly, enabling conditions (affordable and accessible technologies and the competences to use ICT) must be put in place, where needed with legislative support. In addition, stakeholders' efforts to deliver effective and inclusive ICT-enabled services must focus on concrete priorities with increased coherence.

¹ COM(2005)229.

² Riga Ministerial conference "ICT for an Inclusive Society"(11-13.6.2006).

Consequently, this Communication proposes a European Initiative on e-Inclusion³ comprising:

A) an **e-Inclusion campaign "e-Inclusion, be part of it!"** to raise awareness and connecting efforts during 2008, to be concluded by a **Ministerial Conference**, to demonstrate concrete progress and reinforce commitments, and

B) a **strategic framework for action** to implement the Riga Ministerial Declaration by:

1. Enabling the conditions for everyone to take part in the information society by bridging the broadband, accessibility and tackling competences gaps.

2. Accelerating effective participation of groups at risk of exclusion and improving quality of life.

3. Integrating e-Inclusion actions to maximise lasting impact.

2. SETTING THE SCENE: STATE OF PLAY AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

The 2006 Riga Ministerial Declaration set targets to be achieved by 2010. If current trends continue, it will be very difficult to achieve most of these targets at overall EU level, although there are wide divergences across Europe and some regions are performing well. Social differences in ICT use persist and in some cases are even widening.

Progress on the targets of the Riga Ministerial Declaration

➤ **Internet usage:** reduce by half the gaps between average EU population and older people, people with disabilities, women, lower education groups, unemployed and “less-developed” regions.

Significant gaps remained at the end of 2006 between the EU-27 average population (45% are regular internet users) and some groups, notably people older than 65 (10% internet users), economically inactive (17% internet users), with low education (25% internet users). Projections show that these disparities will not be halved by 2010.

➤ **Broadband coverage:** reach more than 90% of the EU population

This target was already reached by the end of 2006 (89 % of the EU population covered), but differences remain between countries and regions, e.g. only 70% of the rural population is covered.

➤ **Digital literacy:** reduce by half gaps between the EU average population and certain groups at risk of exclusion

Significant gaps remained at the end of 2006 between the EU-27 average population (59% have minimum digital literacy level) and some groups, notably people older than 65 (only 17% digitally literate), economically inactive (27% digitally literate), with low education (35%).

³ Based on feedback from the i2010 high-level group and the i2010 e-Inclusion subgroup, consultations with stakeholders, online public consultation, studies and impact assessment.

- **Accessibility of public websites:** all public sites to comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0, which is especially important for disabled people.

Still far from target at the end of 2006 (a minority of surveyed public websites were fully compliant with these Guidelines).

All the main categories of actors – individual users, ICT industry, service providers, public authorities - remain confronted with a series of barriers that hamper progress.

2.1. Users and non-users: many do not take an active part in the information society

ICT use, especially of mobile telephony and internet services, has rapidly spread across many segments of the population. Over recent years, digital gaps have been reduced in relation to gender, age, or the unemployed versus the working force. But there are structural divides that do not disappear and major challenges remain ahead. In particular:

- ICT has enabled significant progress for many. However, there is still insufficient supply of accessible ICT, due to market or other barriers.
- Differences in digital competences persist. As ICT uses and ICT-enabled services expand some people lag further behind, notably those outside the labour force or with low education levels. Lack of available content in languages understandable to potential users remains also a barrier.
- There are also disparities between schools in terms of broadband connections, computer availability and ICT skills of teachers and between SMEs in reaping ICT benefits.
- Even though internet penetration continues to increase, about 50% of the European population does not use the internet regularly. The non-users are predominantly among the low-educated, economically inactive or elderly people.
- Users can also step up efforts: their voice is still fragmented and relatively weak in Europe compared to e.g. the USA.

e-Inclusion goal: bridging the digital availability, accessibility, affordability and ability gaps

2.2. ICT industry and service providers: inclusive ICT solutions remain insufficient and fragmented

A number of industry players are making significant efforts to improve e-Inclusion, e.g. e-Accessibility or training.⁴ However, there is still insufficient supply of ICT solutions which are affordable and adapted to particular individual needs. Specific problems, where industry and providers should play a stronger role, are:

- Broadband connections are still not available in some parts of Europe, gaps remain between urban and rural areas, and there are significant differences in the price of broadband services.

⁴ E.g. see EICTA paper “Moving Towards a Fully Inclusive Digital Europe”

- Lack of e-Accessibility persists in many countries, e.g. regarding websites, digital television, phone access to emergency services, or public information terminals, and new barriers appear. This is often due to structural market failures and lack of common approaches in the internal market which pose serious barriers for industry. Mass-market technologies and services often continue to ignore inclusive design/ design for all. An e-Accessibility business of many billions is left untapped (disabled people are estimated at 15% of EU population).
- Overall, the e-Accessibility situation is better in countries with strong regulation, which does not constitute a barrier to a fully competitive ICT market. On the contrary, legal requirements on e-Accessibility have set a level playing field for companies and led to new business opportunities.

e-Inclusion goal: stimulate and enable inclusive ICT as a viable and thriving business

2.3. Public authorities: policy action is not sufficiently co-ordinated and effective

Many public authorities at all levels carry out initiatives that favour e-Inclusion. These range from acknowledging legal rights for ICT access and accessibility, to financial support for e-Inclusion actions. The EU has also been very active through its policy agendas on the information society, data protection, social inclusion and employment, public procurement, research, education, culture, and standardisation. e-Inclusion is one of the cornerstones of the i2010 initiative, which was followed up by concrete policy actions⁵. The 2006 Riga Ministerial Declaration prepared the ground for a comprehensive policy, identifying priorities and committing to specific targets. However, much remains to be done:

- Awareness, evidence of the impact and understanding of the link of ICT usage with social and economic participation all remain insufficient.⁶
- e-Inclusion considerations are still not common place in social, economic and technological policy agendas, and strategic approaches for stakeholders' cooperation around common goals are often missing or insufficient.
- Activities are often fragmented, without sufficient co-ordination of public actions with the efforts of civil society and business. This partly is due to the multi-faceted nature of e-Inclusion, where several ministries can be involved.
- There is a lack of effective legislative frameworks to firmly safeguard rights of users at risk of exclusion in the internal market. This is particularly visible for e-Accessibility: legislation is fragmented across Europe and of a limited impact. Relevant EU provisions are implemented inconsistently or not at all, mainly due to their non-binding nature, and national approaches can diverge significantly.⁷ This hinders common e-Accessibility features to the detriment of many users and of the ICT industry, which is confronted with fragmented markets and diversity of requirements.

e-Inclusion goal: coherent and efficient e-Inclusion policies and legislation

⁵ Government COM(2006)173, ICT and ageing COM(2007)332, and e-skills COM(2007) 496.

⁶ However, the Disability Action Plan (COM/2003/650) has since its launch addressed ICT.

⁷ See reports from the INCOM-COCOM group on e-Accessibility EU legal provisions, and study "Measuring e-Accessibility in Europe".

3. ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES: THE EUROPEAN INITIATIVE ON E-INCLUSION

Acting on the problems identified in the previous section will lead to tangible progress towards the i2010 and Riga targets on e-Inclusion. The European Initiative on e-Inclusion therefore firstly aims to increase the sense of urgency and raise the visibility of the important contribution that e-Inclusion can make to quality of life, economic growth and jobs and to reinforce the main commitments made in Riga. The Initiative does not impose administrative or financial burden at EU level.

"e-Inclusion, be part of it": raising awareness and connecting efforts

- The Commission will run a dedicated campaign throughout 2008 ("e-Inclusion, be part of it") building on a call for contributions, and giving visibility to e-Inclusion initiatives, events and results from all across Europe.
- The Commission will organise a High-Level Ministerial Conference on e-Inclusion at the end of 2008 to bring together and publicize a wide range of achievements in e-Inclusion, profile them with a European e-Inclusion award, reflect on the state of play and set new directions for the future.

Secondly, the European Initiative on e-Inclusion provides a framework for action, which builds on existing activities seeking synergies between them, fills gaps and ultimately aims at better e-Inclusion impact through a coherent set of actions in three areas:

- **Enabling** the conditions for everyone to take part in the information society
- **Accelerating** effective participation of groups at risk of exclusion and improving quality of life
- **Integrating** e-Inclusion actions to maximise lasting impact.

3.1. Enabling the conditions for everyone to take part in the information society

Pre-conditions for participating in the information society are the availability of affordable and accessible ICT, and the ability of individuals to use them. Still today, there are many people who do not have the possibility to fully benefit from ICT possibilities, because those pre-conditions are not met. Some have no physical access to ICT products and services, notably broadband, for others the use of ICT is not affordable. Moreover, to fully reap the benefits of the information society, it is essential to ensure that broadband with sufficient speed is provided. In a few years time a minimum speed of 20 Mbit/sec will be needed for services such as telemedicine that are of great importance for many people at risk of exclusion, in particular for the growing population of elderly persons. It is also important to raise awareness of the risks involved in processing personal data through ICT networks and educate users in this field, e.g. risks of identity theft, discriminatory profiling or continuous surveillance.⁸

For many people with disabilities, e-Accessibility barriers remain a major obstacle. The 2005 e-Accessibility Communication⁹ announced that further measures could be proposed in 2007,

⁸ These are addressed in the Communication on Privacy Enhancing Technologies (COM (2007) 228).

⁹ COM(2005)425.

including new legislation, if appropriate. Pan-European surveys and the public consultation to prepare this Communication indicate that progress remains unsatisfactory. Though several countries have adopted measures, including legislation, their impact is sometimes limited because they are poorly implemented. It is therefore important to set clear EU rules and mechanisms, as recently called for by the European Economic and Social Committee¹⁰. And this must be done now, before divergent national intervention continues to further fragment the market, and before new mass-market technologies such as digital TV are massively rolled out. Legal action and non-regulatory support (pilots, research, promotion) should go together. International cooperation in e-Accessibility should continue to be pursued as well.

Finally, the fact that many people at risk of exclusion still do not have the necessary digital competences needs to be addressed.

Bridging the broadband gap

- The Commission will stimulate regional initiatives on an inclusive information society through thematic networks in the framework of the European Commission initiative on "Regions for Economic Change".¹¹ The Cohesion Policy Fund will continue targeting investment in knowledge in areas where commercial deployment of ICT infrastructure and services is inadequate.
- EU regional and local authorities must drive the effort to bridge the broadband gap, including by using EU structural and rural development funds, to promote an inclusive information society, especially in remote and rural areas. They must support infrastructure as well as e-services and applications for citizens (e-health, e-government, e-learning and e-inclusion).
- The Commission will support in the framework of the ICT-Policy Support Programme (ICT-PSP) a web platform on regional initiatives for the information society, and will conduct a survey on EU funding for regional information society projects.

Bridging the e-Accessibility gap

- ICT industry should rapidly commit to putting in place, in the 2008-2010 timeframe, privacy-friendly solutions for persons with sensory, physical, motor and/ or cognitive restrictions to make use of digital TV (accessible DTV) and of electronic communications ('total conversation') notably to safeguard access to emergency services and interoperability (in line with the proposed revision of the e-Communications Directives), building on their current cooperation with users.
- Industry and users should continue their co-operation with the European Standardisation Organisations to pursue standardisation efforts, notably for public procurement of accessible ICT products and services. They are also expected continue the current cooperation in order to put in place a European training programme on Inclusive ICT Design no later than the end of 2008.

¹⁰ EESC opinion on Future eAccessibility legislation (TEN/295. 30 May 2007).

¹¹ COM(2006) 675 final.

- Member States are called upon to strengthen their follow-up of e-Accessibility requirements in current EU legislation and to agree by mid 2008 on a roadmap for accessibility of public websites.
- The Commission will co-finance in the 2007 ICT-PSP a pilot on accessible digital TV, intends to fund in the 2008 ICT-PSP a pilot on 'total conversation' and common approaches to web accessibility, notably through a European benchmarking methodology, and will continue to pursue e-Accessibility and assistive technology research in the EU R&D Seventh Framework Programme (FP7).
- The Commission will work towards a horizontal legislative approach for an accessible information society, to guarantee equal rights and an effective internal market. A public consultation and an impact assessment in the first half of 2008 will provide input for a possible proposal from the Commission on e-Accessibility legislation in the second half of 2008. In parallel, the Commission will seek to reinforce its proposals to the European Parliament and to the Council on the e-Accessibility dimension in the revised EC Directives on electronic communications.

Tackling the digital competences gap

- Authorities at all levels, together with industry and social organisations, have a major responsibility to improve digital competences, in line with the commitments of Riga and the Recommendation on key competences of lifelong learning¹². Education and training systems are key to build digital competence. Authorities, in cooperation with industry, are called upon to step up in 2008 their efforts to promote e-skills and basic digital literacy training, notably for those that are most at risk of exclusion.
- The Commission, in line with the Riga Declaration, is carrying out an EU-wide review on digital competences with advice from a Digital Literacy Expert Group, and will provide guidance on digital competences policy for vulnerable groups by the end of 2008.

3.2. Accelerating effective participation of target groups at risk of exclusion and improving quality of life

Ensuring that the enabling conditions are in place is necessary but not sufficient. It is also necessary to stimulate effective use of ICT-enabled services and provide competence building opportunities via education and training services. e-Inclusion actions must focus on people at risk of exclusion, and on those who tend not to use ICT and are losing out on potential benefits to their quality of life. The Riga Declaration identified several target groups including elderly people, people with disabilities and cultural minorities. Learning resources for special needs education on the internet are relevant in this context.

¹² Recommendation by Council and Parliament 2006/962/EC.

Including the socially disadvantaged through modern public e-services

- Public authorities are called upon to significantly reinforce their inclusive e-Government and e-Participation activities in line with the Lisbon Ministerial e-Government Declaration of September 2007. This is the most direct way to promote inclusion, especially for social services directly in contact with people at risk of exclusion.
- The Commission will support, through the ICT-PSP and the e-participation programmes, exchange and analysis of good practice, and piloting of innovative solutions.

Addressing ageing, health conditions and disability in the information society

- Industry, user organizations, Member States, and the Commission must implement the EU Action Plan on “Ageing well in the information society”¹³ and thus bring a major contribution to the e-Inclusion Summit at the end of 2008.
- The Commission will provide sustained support for research and for deployment on ICT-enabled innovative solutions relating to ageing, disability and health. It will also prepare an agenda on ICT for active ageing and the workplace.
- The Commission will issue early 2008 a Recommendation on e-Health interoperability (addressing core e-Health infrastructure data of patient summary and emergency data set) and launch in 2008 a new European initiative on telemedicine to be supported by the ICT-PSP programme.

Exploring ICT-enabled opportunities for marginalised young people and migrants at risk of exclusion.

- Industry and authorities in European countries have the main responsibility to explore the potential of new technologies to enable innovative services and empower people in particular young people at risk of exclusion, migrants and cultural minorities, notably through multilingual and adapted content.
- The Commission will support new areas of e-Inclusion through exchange of practices and targeted projects in the EU research and deployment programmes (FP7 and ICT-PSP).

3.3. Integrating e-Inclusion actions to maximise lasting impact

In order to have a full and lasting impact it is necessary to align policy agendas at EU and national level, mainstream e-Inclusion across relevant policies and better co-ordinate actions. Voluntary industry agreements relevant to e-Inclusion should receive full support from European and national authorities. User organisations must reinforce their e-Inclusion.

¹³ COM(2007) 332.

Enhancing and sustaining impact through mainstreaming and co-ordination

- Industry, social organisations and public authorities must better co-ordinate their efforts on e-Inclusion, and are called upon to join forces in an open e-Inclusion partnership building on the existing cooperation. The Commission will continue to support organisations of users in stepping up their e-Inclusion efforts in co-ordination with the i2010 high-level group.
- Policy-makers at all levels are called upon to address the potential of ICT in social and economic policies, and conversely, to take into account social inclusion aspects, non discrimination principles and accessibility, in policy initiatives relating to ICT and in related impact assessments.
- The Commission in response to the European Parliament's call for initiatives on the digital rights of users¹⁴ will clarify existing rights and obligations of consumers in the digital environment.
- The Commission will further contribute by promoting social inclusion in 2008 on the occasion of the review of i2010, of the communication on universal service of electronic communications and of the EU international strategy on the information society. It will also continue addressing ICT accessibility aspects, in the third phase of the Disability Action plan, for adoption by end 2007, and will follow-up on the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The Commission is also conducting an impact assessment on possible measures to complement current EU anti-discrimination legislative framework based on Article 13 of the EU Treaty.
- Finally, the Commission will show the way by making the Europa web site more user-friendly, improving multi-lingualism and accessibility.

Improving understanding and comparing progress of e-Inclusion

- The Commission will improve monitoring and analysis of e-Inclusion, tracking progress towards the Riga targets on a yearly basis through a set of indicators (“Riga Dashboard”).
- The Commission will pursue surveys and studies amongst others on barriers for assistive technology, adaptive learning resources, e-Inclusion and social capital, social and economic impact of ICT, and perceptions of the information society.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The role of the information society for economic and social participation should be firmly put on Europe’s economic and social agenda. Reinforcing the Lisbon agenda, solidly based on i2010, and building on the Riga e-Inclusion Ministerial Declaration, this Communication presents a comprehensive e-Inclusion strategy, to take away the barriers in the information society itself, to maximise the contribution of ICT to economic and social inclusion and to stimulate business opportunities in this context.

¹⁴ Non-legislative Resolution on Consumer confidence in the digital environment (INI/2006/2048).

The Commission now calls upon the European Parliament, Member States, regions and stakeholders to put words into action and make e-Inclusion a reality, with the support of the policy actions outlined in this Communication. These joint efforts will contribute to business opportunities and to achieve an accessible and inclusive information society in which each and every one of us can participate on equal terms.