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The digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions

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Summary:

In Europe today, there are large gaps between different population groups in terms of access to the information and communication technologies and their distribution and use.

Although the term “digital divide” is often employed, the gaps are not a clear-cut division but rather a series of divisions superimposed on one another, and the ICTs merely reveal the exclusion that already exists in our societies.

The concept of e-inclusion poses the question of equal access to the “information society” or the “knowledge society”. It is a multidimensional concept and embodies every citizen’s right to access the ICTs and acquire skills and information.

In this connection, the authorities bear considerable responsibility and have a fundamental role to play as decision-makers, providers of essential services and driving forces for change.

R : Chamber of Regions / L : Chamber of Local Authorities
ILDG : Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD : Group European People’s Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC : Socialist Group of the Congress
NR : Member not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress

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Foreword

Aware of the need for tangible responses to the situations that adversely affect social cohesion in Europe's towns, cities and regions, the Committee for Social Cohesion of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is particularly conscious of the issue of equal access to the new technologies. In response to a request by its Chamber of Regions, the Committee has accordingly decided to deal in a report with the question of the digital divide between and within the regions and the associated issue of e-inclusion.

The aim of this report is to set out the problem (the present and future impact of the digital divides), the role the regions might play (examples of good practices) and the recommendations that might be made to the European regional and national authorities.

Introduction

The digital divide, e-inclusion or e-exclusion – more and more terms and keywords are being used to describe the fact that the information society is excluding part of the population.

The information and communication technologies (ICTs), which are symbolised by the omnipresent internet and by mobile terminals, such as mobile telephones, are by no means used in the same way by all European citizens. But can we really speak of a "digital divide"? This term, like "social divide", presupposes a society that makes up a unified whole, "a single social body" that the technologies have succeeded in dividing[1]. The ICTs are not so much forces of division as factors that reveal the exclusion that exists in our societies. Moreover, if there is a divide it is multidimensional. In an evolving situation, it depends on many factors (which are described in the first part of this report) and takes on very different forms.

The term e-inclusion, which is another example of the way in which the ICTs unite or disunite society, sets out to be more positive. It raises the question of equal access to the "information society" (a model of a society in which the ICTs play a key role) or "knowledge society" (a notion that presupposes that the ICTs permit the exchange not only of information but also of knowledge).

Whatever the terms adopted, the problem lies at the level of the social bond, not the technologies. The core of the issue is information and communication, which are the aims of the ICTs, and not the technologies themselves, which are simply vehicles that permit social interaction.

No attempt should be made to impose digital integration. Official policies must encourage the use of the technologies and enable people to use them but not force this to be done, which would in any case be counter-productive. Differences and inequalities should not be confused with one another. Exclusion is rooted in inequalities and leads to marginalisation. Inclusion is not the opposite of exclusion: it is possible not to use the ICTs or be on the "wrong side" of the divide while being socially fully integrated.

Digital inclusion is thus not independent and separate from social inclusion: e-inclusion policies should be aimed at social inclusion in the context of an "information society" and accordingly be a policy priority.

This report thus starts from the assumption that the technologies have no advantage and value in themselves and that only their use "with added social value" justifies official intervention to permit society's harmonious and lasting development with the aid of the tools constituted by the ICTs.

At a time when sustainable development is a key concern, it may be instructive to compare the current development of the telecommunications networks and the ICTs to the past development of road networks and the motorcar. For many European citizens it is undeniably an asset to have a car and live, or be able to locate a company, close to a link to a fast road, just as not having a car and/or living in a remote area is a negative social indicator. However, we now realise that the societal model based on the motorcar is unsustainable and we might sometimes regret the construction of certain pieces of infrastructure or the difficulty in getting citizens to acknowledge they do not need their own car.

1. Philippe Cazeneuve, "L'accessibilité pour tous aux TIC", CREATIF 2006.

In the same way, the subject of the ICTs, which are, as a whole, positive and constitute factors of economic, social and human development, must be tackled with due discernment without losing sight of the long-term public interest.

This report seeks to provide some food for thought and help with decision-making in the pursuit of the goal of social cohesion beyond (and sometimes thanks to) the ICTs, but never for the sole benefit of the technologies themselves or the economic players involved in their development.

The digital divide in Europe: background and factors

Background

Increasingly widespread computer use and internet access

The level of home internet access is gradually improving: in 2004, one-third of households in the European Union had accessed the internet from home at least once in the previous three months. According to a study by the French Ministry of Culture[2], the figure was almost 50% in 2007. However, in the EU-27 in 2007 46% of households still had no internet connection.

The percentage of broadband connections is rising even more rapidly: the number of households with a broadband connection went up from 30% to 42% between 2006 and 2007[3]. Broadband is still a relative concept and is evolving all the time. In the absence of an official definition, the minimum speed can be considered to be 2Mbps, but the main feature required is the availability of a flat rate at all times. The "feeling" of having broadband also depends on its use: a few hundred Kbps are sufficient to send an email without a large file attached, while watching a television-quality film on the internet requires a speed of at least 1 Mbps.

The average price of micro-computers has fallen considerably. A basic micro-computer is now less expensive than a mid-range television set or washing machine, to take the most widespread consumer durables as examples. The growing range of cultural, commercial or recreational content is encouraging the purchase of more and more computers, especially in households with children. Moreover, possessing a computer depends to a lesser extent than in the past on a person's age education, income and occupation.

With this reduction in the purchase price of computers, the ever more frequent access to these resources at school or public digital spaces and the ease of using certain functions (electronic bulletin board, information search, access to online content, office automation), the main barriers to buying a computer mentioned by households (lack of use, price and insufficient skills) are becoming less pronounced.

These results are encouraging. However, in the EU-27 36% of households still had no computer at home in 2007.

One recent development leads us to qualify the indicator of the number of households with a computer. While the computer (a sometimes intimidating object for some users) was until recently the only means of accessing the internet and constituted the iconic digital device, the mobile telephone is now a real digital companion. With penetration rates well over 100%, including in countries that have developed more recently (Turkey, Ukraine), the mobile telephone is gaining general acceptance as a new means of accessing a range of evolving digital services.

The budgets allocated by European households to mobile telephony are growing. Looking at the situation in the most advanced countries, and taking account of the competition in this sector, we can expect to see per-minute rates below 20 cents in the years to come.

2. "Diffusion et utilisation des TIC en France et en Europe in 2008", study carried out by the Department of Research, Forecasting and Statistics of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, May 2008), http://www.culture.gouv.fr.
3. Eurostat.

Since 2007 and the development of the so-called ""3G" networks (especially UMTS in Europe), the mobile telephone has become open to new applications and services. In particular, UMTS enables multimedia content such as pictures, sound and video to be sent in a relatively short space of time. The new services mainly involve the video aspect: videophony, MMS, video on demand, television.

Interactive services are also emerging: the geolocation of data (answering, for example, the question "where can I find the nearest post office?"), transport applications (digital tickets by telephone, transport on demand by SMS, etc), information in real time on important events or natural hazards.

There are still significant differences between European regions

The countries of northern Europe (Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands) are still the broadband leaders. The penetration rate in Denmark (37.2%) is twice as high as the European average.

In terms of use, four groups of European countries can be distinguished:

- A first group where the regular internet users make up over 85% of the population aged 25 to 54: the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Sweden.
- A second group with between 70% and 80% of 25-54-year-olds regular users: Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, Austria. Two others (France and Estonia) are somewhere between this and the following group, with 65% regular users.
- A third group consists of countries where internet users are a small majority in this age bracket (around 50% to 60%). These are all the countries that have not yet been mentioned and are not included in the fourth group either.
- In the fourth group, the percentage of regular users between 25 and 54 years of age is from 40% to 20%, in decreasing order: Poland, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania.

In terms of hardware, the countries of the eastern Mediterranean appear less well equipped with broadband access than the others, this being due to the late rollout of ADSL or fibre optic cables in this part of Europe. Narrow-band connections are tending to disappear except in certain countries: in the countries of the eastern Mediterranean[4], dial-up is more common than broadband; in Ireland and Cyprus, it has the same usage rate as broadband, and in Germany it is used by 30% of households with internet access.

As regards the regional disparities in terms of urban or rural environments, 52% of European town-dwellers and 30% of Europeans living in rural areas regularly used the internet in 2006[5]. In European rural areas, nearly three people in ten had no broadband connection. The broadband coverage in rural areas is 71%.

Internet access has an impact on the location of companies: areas with few or poor connections that get linked up will become more attractive to companies, which will locate there because it is easier to access the internet and broadband. This would therefore allow these areas to undergo new economic development and permit increased social and cultural activity.

Issue addressed by the European Commission

In terms of internet access, the European Union has undertaken to ensure that place of residence does not limit the opportunities for accessing the ICTs. The member states have set themselves an objective: in 2010, nearly 90% of the population will have broadband internet access.

The challenges are considerable: everywhere in Europe, regional disparities are linked to differences of economic development. In some European countries, economic activities are very much centred on large cities. The geographical digital divide is in danger of growing if certain areas remain "excluded" from high-speed internet. The internet is an inexpensive means of communication that facilitates the transmission of information from one point of the country to another, so being located outside the major urban centres does not necessarily

4. "Diffusion et utilisation des TIC en France et in Europe in 2008", study carried out by the Department of Research, Forecasting and Statistics of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, May 2008.
5. "Measuring Progress in e-inclusion", European Commission study, Riga Dashboard 2007.

preclude participation in economic activity provided it is possible to connect up to the telecommunications network.

In addition to infrastructure measures, the EU member states declared their commitment to e-inclusion at the Riga conference[6] in June 2006 and set out an agenda for this in the ministerial declaration that resulted from this meeting. They approved the pan-European commitment to use the ICTs to help people to overcome the difficulties they face because of their disability, geographical location, education or social or economic environment. The main aims of e-inclusion on which the ministers agreed are to increase the use of the internet by groups at risk of exclusion, to speed up broadband network coverage in Europe in order to bring it to at least 90%, to improve e-skills and enable the largest possible number of people to acquire them, and to make all public internet sites accessible by 2010.

The concept of e-accessibility was reaffirmed by this text as a prerequisite for e-inclusion. E-accessibility means ensuring access to the ICTs and their services for individuals who have specific needs, such as people with disabilities or the elderly. In September 2005, the Commission adopted a communication on e-accessibility[7] that proposes a series of measures aimed at better co-ordination between industry and the member states in order to harmonise the solutions offered on this subject at the European level. Among other measures, this document proposed using public procurement contracts to improve the accessibility requirements in the ICT field or develop a certification scheme for accessible ICT products and services. The EU's efforts to ensure e-accessibility now form part of the third pillar of i2010 in the e-inclusion context.

Today, despite the efforts and initiatives of the Commission and the member states to meet the Riga objectives, the digital divide is still with us. If we want to achieve these objectives, the EU must embrace certain challenges that might be included in the list of recommendations proposed in this report:

- overcoming the cost barriers or the obstacles to availability, accessibility and digital capacity in order to improve the integration of users into the information society;
- encouraging the creation of inclusive ICT solutions and turning them into a viable and profitable market;
- framing coherent and effective e-inclusion policies and legislation.

The factors of digital exclusion

There are large gaps between different population groups today in terms of access to the ICTs, their distribution and their use. These gaps can be measured on the basis of demographic and socio-occupational variables (age, gender, family composition, level of education, income, occupational category) or geographical or geopolitical variables (gaps between urban and rural areas, between regions, between countries or between North and South).

These gaps are not a clear-cut division but a series of divisions superimposed on one another. As with any exclusion situation, it is possible to observe a cause-effect reaction in the case of this phenomenon. Data from recent studies make it possible to build up a varied picture of the gaps in ICT access (especially the internet) and use. Fully embracing the ICTs and their content, – ie, using them in a motivated and efficient way – is a complex process that requires many material as well as mental, social and cultural resources.

According to the study "Construction des compétences numériques et réduction des inégalités - une exploration de la fracture numérique au second degré" ("Building e-skills and reducing inequalities. Exploring the digital divide at secondary school level") published in June 2008 by Périne Brotcorne and Gérard Valenduc, "the three primary risk factors are unemployment, a low level of education and the exercise of a low-skilled manual occupation".

According to the same study, three aspects of the digital divide emerge: the social divide, the generation gap and proxy use, by which is meant use by people who are not autonomous in their employment of the internet but are not excluded from the benefits of online services and need a third party's help to use the ICTs.

6. http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/ict_riga_2006/doc/declaration_riga.pdf .
7. Official document: "eAccessibility", Communication of 13 September 2005 [COM (2005) 425 final].

Level of education, income and employment: the main indicators of digital divides

- *Level of basic education*

With respect to the level of education, it has been established that 75% of well-educated Europeans regularly used the internet in 2006, compared with 25% of Europeans with a low level of education[8]. In the latter group, 67% have never used the internet and only 2% use it to a significant extent. Individuals with no secondary school certificate clearly represent a sub-group standing on the internet sidelines, as do illiterate people.

Comparative studies carried out over the years at the European level suggest that the situation of poorly qualified individuals is hardly changing at all. Nonetheless, some targeted efforts in the field of continuing education can enable the gaps to be significantly reduced.

- *Income*

There is a virtually linear relationship between income/standard of living and regular internet use. This inequality tends to persist in countries where the internet is becoming more widespread. For many Europeans, the digital divide coincides with a substantial social divide. People are not only experiencing the digital divide but also a social divide and poverty that make it virtually impossible for them to access the technologies.

The various obstacles are usually coupled with emotional difficulties or negative feelings towards the ICTs (frustration, annoyance), educational or financial difficulties, social pressure, the children's monopolisation of the PC, and/or illiteracy, which make it even harder to access the technologies. These disadvantaged groups are trapped by exclusion and threatened by marginalisation[9].

- *Employment and social status*

The largest group of internet users mainly consists of students and people in employment. In 2006, 60% of wage and salary earners regularly used the internet. This figure dropped to 38% for jobseekers and 18% for the economically inactive[10].

The predominance of the intellectual professions and students persists, but the ICTs and the internet are gradually making a breakthrough among manual workers and jobseekers. 48% of European jobseekers have never used the internet and only 3% use it to a significant extent. The European figures for people who have never used the web rises to 75% among the economically inactive, and no one in this group uses it a significant extent.

People who are not working and not seeking employment thus constitute a sub-group standing on the internet sidelines. In a world of work where the information technologies are developing fast (including in industry, agriculture or commerce), individuals who are not familiar with and have not been trained to use a computer and the internet aggravate their situation of exclusion and suffer from a very real impediment to their vocational development.

- *Senior citizens left standing by the younger generation*

Unsurprisingly, the biggest users of the ICTs and the internet are mainly young people. Among the 16- to 24-year-olds in the 27 European Union countries, an average of 89% have used a computer in the last three months and 85% have accessed the internet at least once (for comparison, only 16% of the 65- to 74-year-olds have visited the web in the last three months).

8. "Measuring Progress in e-inclusion", European Commission study, Riga Dashboard 2007.
9. Belgian conference on poverty and technology, lecture by Gérard Valenduc, Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) and Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix (FUNDP), taking stock of a report by the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (viWTA).
10. "Measuring Progress in e-inclusion", European Commission study, Riga Dashboard 2007.

In 2007, among Europeans over 65 years of age, 78% had never used a computer or used one more than a year before. 83% had never used the internet and no one in this group had a “high level of internet use”. This group actually appears to be a sub-group on the sidelines of the internet and the ICTs.

The age-related digital divide is, however, tending to narrow. In the context of population ageing, the ICTs can be regarded as a social need and an economic opportunity. Comparative studies carried out over the years at the European level show that the over 50s are gradually beginning to familiarise themselves with the ICTs. More and more senior citizens are socialising together via the internet and early retirees are swelling their ranks.

FURTHER ASPECTS

The ICTs, an opportunity in the context of an ageing population

Apart from the contribution made by the ICTs in the field of health care (they can help elderly people to improve their quality of life, stay in good health and live independent lives for longer than in the past), these technologies can enable the elderly to communicate with the world outside, continue to work or remain active in their community. The experience and skills they have accumulated constitute a significant resource, especially in the knowledge-based society (cf. the June 2007 Action Plan on Information and Communication Technologies and Ageing “Ageing well in the Information Society” - An i2010 initiative - [COM(2007) 332 final]).

It should be stressed that the age variable also has consequences in terms of inter-generational relations. While some senior citizens remain on the technology sidelines, their children or grandchildren use these technologies from a very young age. An inter-generational, digital and social gap is thus emerging, but the ICTs can provide opportunities for relations between the generations, play a role in shifting the inter-generational barriers and even be a vehicle for forging links between people.

- *Women: ICT users but still little involved in the ICT sector*

Comparative studies carried out over the years at the European level suggest that the gaps between men and women in terms of ICT use are gradually beginning to disappear. The disparities become less pronounced when internet availability becomes more widespread (Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands).

However, when we consider the low number of women in ICT study and training courses and, consequently, in jobs that involve these technologies, it seems self-evident that a considerable amount of information work and awareness-raising is still to be done. In most European countries, female computer scientists make up less than 30% of the total employed in the profession, which is one of the few sectors where the number of women is declining.

The ICT world and digital life convey specific social perceptions, and women’s access to these environments comes up against obstacles that cannot be reduced to glass-ceiling issues or the fact that women are not drawn to the sciences. Encouraging women’s access to the ICTs is a prerequisite for narrowing the digital divide, and urging women to participate in technology development is another major equal opportunities issue.

- *Family composition: children as driving forces of e-inclusion*

Households with children have computers more often than those made up solely of adults. In the EU-27 in 2007, 79% of households with children at home had a PC or pocket computer, while only 57% of households without children had one. Similar gaps also exist as far as the level of internet access is concerned. In the EU in 2007, 66% of households with children had an internet connection at home, while only 49% of households without children had one.

These gaps reflect the significant demand for communication and leisure services from families with children. Households without children comprise those made up solely of adults, those where the children have left home and those that have not had any children. The gaps can also be partly explained by the differences in household

income. For example, as a general rule fewer single-parent families than families with two adults have a computer.

However, the presence of children in a household is not enough to mitigate social exclusion situations, which manifest themselves in e-exclusion: single parents and single women with children belong to the disadvantaged groups. Moreover, single women are a sub-group that is clearly standing on the internet sidelines (69%).

- *Disability: an issue concerning the universal accessibility of digital services*

Contrary to what might be believed, people with disabilities (especially those with visual impairments) possess several tools for navigating the web. However, there are many sites that fail to take account of these users and prevent them from making full use of the online content.

An accessible website is one that permits equal access to its content and functionalities irrespective of the user's attributes (age, disabilities, etc) and of the conditions of use (access terminal, low-speed connection, etc).

Tim Berners-Lee, Director of the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) and inventor of the web, defines accessibility as the ability to "make the Web and its services accessible to all regardless of their hardware or software, network infrastructure, native tongue, culture, geographic location or physical/mental abilities".

With more internet users in the world than computer users (898 million), digital accessibility is becoming an issue of crucial importance. The European Union wants to make all public European websites accessible by 2010, but while European governments seem anxious to provide access to online services it is surprising to note that many public websites are still so inaccessible or difficult to use.

A study commissioned by the British EU presidency which covered 436 public service websites in the 25 EU members revealed that 70% did not meet the WCAG 1.0 criteria. To be more precise, there were pictures without captions or descriptions, content was not properly separated from the presentation, the HTML code was invalid in 99% of cases, etc. The European Commission study "Measuring Progress in e-inclusion", Riga Dashboard 2007, confirms these statistics: in 2006, only 5% of public European sites were accessible.

As regards sanctions for failing to comply with the accessibility recommendations, there is currently no provision in Europe for a financial penalty or an order to close down a website (the UK provides for both types of penalty). The inaccessible sites should be listed and the need to comply with the law pointed out. In the light of these findings, it is becoming imperative to show better concern for accessibility and disabilities.

- *Lack of awareness of the opportunities and resistance to change*

Concurrently with the spread of equipment, digital practices are taking hold more and more, including in the social categories in which the ICTs used to be the least widespread. Digital convergence is making a big contribution to this as it significantly increases the number of services: voice-over IP for telephoning from one's computer, triple or quadruple play bundles (internet television, fixed-line and/or mobile telephony). It is accompanied by new ways of accessing cultural content: streaming, podcast audio or video (download).

However, while these technologies (IT, internet, mobile telephony, digital television, multimedia products) are spreading to all areas of society, some Europeans do not use them either because they are unaware of the opportunities offered or do not have the necessary skills. The non-use of the ICTs and/or the internet may be linked to a lack of interest or perceived benefit. More often than not, these attitudes are the result of a general lack of familiarity with these tools.

Another type of gap lies in the inability to use the ICTs and internet efficiently and effectively owing to a lack of knowledge about the skills required and the resources available. It is noticeable that the gap between the internet user's lifestyle and that of the non-internet user is growing year by year and helping to make initiation more difficult and even to increase the marginalisation of those who stand aside from these technologies.

The (present or future) non-use of the ICTs or internet at the European level may also be due to psychological variables: fear of change or resistant attitudes.

Some users project their own personal, social or learning difficulties onto the ICTs, even though these tools provide a way out of this situation. They have a feeling of fear or mistrust towards anything that is new, too technical or appears too complex and they do not have the patience to learn to use a computer and feel no desire to possess the technology for these reasons.

Other users, sometimes educated to a high level, say they are suspicious or sceptical of the ICTs and often produce sound arguments concerning the objective risks and limits of the ICTs. Many of them know enough about the technologies to have used them, especially during their working life, but have deliberately chosen not to use them despite the fact that the economic conditions and skill levels are often favourable. In the long run, growing social pressure may lead to their abandoning their refusal to use the ICTs. Some Europeans continue to have genuine concerns about using the internet, repeatedly citing such aspects as security, data reliability and the protection of minors.

A particular category in the context of the digital divide consists of individuals who do not use the internet themselves but ask friends and relatives to do research or send messages on the networks.

These groups vary considerably in their socio-economic characteristics (which makes it hard to introduce targeted measures). These non-users are among the various groups mentioned above: they are of all ages (apart from the under-25s), are to be found in all occupational categories (except for the students), represent all levels of education, come from many different occupational backgrounds or are economically inactive (young retirees or senior citizens).

Finally, mention should be made of linguistic or cultural barriers: Europe has a wide variety of languages and cultures, which is one of its strengths. However, this particular strength may turn into a weakness. Immigrants in particular form part of one of the sub-groups with low levels of ICT familiarity or skills. The European Union remains convinced that increasing the level of ICT familiarity and skills will enable communication between the different communities and cultures to be facilitated and strengthened and that this will permit the construction of a harmonious Europe. A major aspect of becoming familiar with the ICTs needs to be stressed here, namely the ability to build bridges between cultures.

The regions and the challenge posed by the digital divides: recommendations

The following recommendations are in logical order but by no means in order of priority. The report's conclusions propose various scenarios for their implementation, which we have attempted to illustrate with "good practices" from various countries, especially in Europe.

1. Universal internet access at the "right speed"

The challenge today with regard to the internet is to be able to access it everywhere, including in rural or remote areas, on islands, etc, and to do so with sufficient speed and at competitive rates. Rather than propose the general introduction of very high-speed broadband - one consequence of which might be simply to widen the existing gaps, and its socially beneficial uses still remain largely to be defined – we think it is more appropriate to propose the "right speed". The concept is admittedly no more precise than that of high speed or very high speed, but it is not a question of volume but one of relevance and of quality.

The right speed is the speed that enables people to make proper use of all the internet's resources, follow a course online, download a film or documentary, follow their preferred podcasts and be able to send this type of information oneself. This is the speed that enables people to comfortably carry out a videoconference conversation and use the IP telephone while surfing the web. Today, most of these applications are already being used with broadband speeds of a few Mbps.

The matter of speed is too often the tree that obscures the forest. The authorities have their role to play in bringing about the balanced distribution of telecommunications infrastructures and must ensure, especially by means of regulations, that the laws of the marketplace are offset by the public interest. Very high-speed broadband is fine if it does not presuppose the authorities investing huge sums that then limit their ability to act on services and their use – in short, the content of those infrastructures.

GOOD PRACTICES:

Various possible approaches by the authorities in the field of digital regional development and telecommunications infrastructures.

Telecommunications infrastructure policies and digital regional planning policies may vary considerably from region to region, especially because of the volume of private investment in this area and any technological limitations, but also because of strategic choices.

Some authorities may decide to act directly regarding the creation of telecommunications networks. The legal and technical aspects of these initiatives vary, but they may be identified according to the nature of the networks set up.

Some authorities may set up closed telecommunications networks, that is to say networks designed solely for groups of public users (educational or health establishments, local authorities, etc). For example, France's Rhône-Alpes region has set up "AMPLIVIA", a broadband network that operates via the National Telecommunications Network for Technology, Education and Research (Réseau national de télécommunications pour la technologie, l'enseignement et la recherche, or "Renater"). It benefits all higher education and research establishments and all schools and aims to encourage the sharing of information and services between these institutions. To date, more than 1,500 establishments have been connected up to the AMPLIVIA network. It links up the seven major regional cities by means of a 1Gb/s loop and ten other points dotted around the regions.

Other authorities may choose to set up networks open to private players (companies, associations, even the general public). This often happens in the case of mobile telephony investments. Mention might be made in particular of the French government's "white zones" programme, which targets the centres of small towns in all the local authority areas identified as not being covered by any mobile telephone operator. The state is financing Phase 1 of the programme with 44 million euros (plus 20 million in respect of VAT). The aim set for the end of 2007 was the coverage of 1,833 small towns (at 31 December 2006, 1,683 local authorities were covered by a mobile telephone network).

Some authorities in Europe may decide to invest heavily in the creation of fast or even very fast broadband networks available to the general public. One example of this is France's Pays de la Loire region, where "Gigalis", a very fast broadband network project set up by public initiative, is expected to contribute to increased unbundling. From the technical viewpoint, the region could become an actual operator by prioritising the long-term leasing of "dark" fibre optic cables and providing equipment or (where this proves impossible) buying open-ended bandwidth services along the lines of GigaEthernet from operators. The declared aim is to provide fibre optic connections to 17 towns with prefecture and sub-prefecture status in the region. Interlinkage is also required so as to avoid any overlapping with existing public networks.

a. The "Broadband Action Plan to 2008" project in Greece

While all these initiatives involve private players at some stage or other, some authorities may choose not to take the place of private investors and to work to make the telecommunications market more attractive while encouraging competition. For example. Greece has carried out an infrastructure development project by means of a market incentive programme in the less well-served areas. According to Yannis Larios from the Greek Ministry of the Economy and Finances, this is "a project levering structural funds and private investments to both promote local access and broadband infrastructure plus stimulate demand across the

country in places where citizens and businesses have difficulties gaining access"[11].

The Greek authorities accordingly designated seven regions, each representing homogeneous markets. Each was subject to a call for tenders designed to promote competition: the service providers were able to bid in no more than three regions and no technology was favoured, etc. However, the local authorities were also keen to make private investment more attractive by developing a policy to stimulate demand, which was assigned almost a quarter of the total budget

b. Dunkirk (France) low-cost housing office tries out low-price internet access

As part of the Domitil project, the Dunkirk urban authority is offering more than 800 households in low-cost rented accommodation the possibility of accessing the internet for just a few euros a month. If there is a good take-up rate, the offer will be extended to 60,000 households.

Since 10 January 2007, 835 households in low-cost rented accommodation in Dunkirk and the surrounding local authorities (in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region) have had internet access with a minimum speed of 512 Kbps and costing 5 euros a month. This is the experimental phase of the Domitil project initiated by the Paris office of the IT consultancy Equitia.

2. Digital terminals available to all

This recommendation may apply to some regions with problems in meeting the cost of acquiring hardware, especially computers. Together with the question of internet access, it forms part of the necessary but not sufficient basis for meeting the conditions of e-inclusion. Moreover, as in the case of access to the internet, it calls on the authorities to regulate the market and help the most disadvantaged groups.

Both for this and the preceding recommendation, it is also important to point out that access does not mean actual use, just as information is not knowledge. A distinction should be drawn between the inequalities in accessing the ICTs (technical access) and the inequalities with regard to knowledge and skills (social access) among those already connected.

Finally, it should be noted that the ICTs are not limited to the personal computer and may use other digital terminals. Today, a mobile telephone does not replace a computer in its ability to produce text, but it does permit many other means of expression that have already been adopted to a significant extent by young people: photographs, videos, sound, etc.

Equipping households with computers may involve the acquisition of cheap computers or even simplified models (along the lines of the OLPC laptop)[12] that are enough for all everyday internet uses. However, this may also be part of an approach involving the recycling of hardware.

For the regions, this recommendation may take the form of the introduction of a policy of recycling a regional institution's hardware. The authorities are bodies that use computers and often have to dispose of their old machines, which, once they have been reconditioned, may well have a new lease of life when made available to low-income households.

11. See Yannis Larios (2007) "Broadband Action Plan to 2008: Enhancing broadband by spurring competition", Conference on "Bridging the Broadband Gap, Brussels, 14 May 2007 - http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/istevent/broadband_gap_2007/cf/conference-detail.cfm?id=1119

12. http://laptop.org/

GOOD PRACTICES:

a. The "Joker" project in the Canton of Lausanne (Switzerland)

This is a project in which computers are refurbished and made available at a very competitive price. Moreover, the computer is also installed by the Joker association at the home of the person acquiring it, and training is provided. The project is run as a partnership with bodies involved in the occupational reintegration of the unemployed, who are trained to repair computers and provide users with support. A scheme of this type would be particularly welcomed as a way of making it easier for older people to get started with a computer.[13]

b. The Swedish experience, a successful example of equipping households with a PC

In the mid-1990s, the Swedish government, which advocates access to sound, good-quality information for all, considered it was the state's responsibility to provide a good-quality public service, including where information and communication infrastructures were concerned.

The Swedish government introduced a tax cut when hardware was acquired under the "Home PC reform" scheme. This reform was supported by companies in order to equip their employees with computers at home. The measure was accordingly financed by the state, which allowed part of the cost of a computer to be offset by an employee against income tax if they wanted to buy the machine from their employer. In October 1997, the parliament decided to grant a tax allowance for the purchase of so-called "loan PCs". This measure allowed an employer to lend new PCs to its employees.

The reform enabled hundreds of thousands of Swedish employees to equip their homes with a PC. In 1998 and 1999, 767,500 PCs were acquired by Swedish households under this project. Between 1998 and 2001, the proportion of households with a PC rose from 41% to 80%[14].

c. The French "student laptop for 1 euro a year" scheme

In France in 2004, 100% of students said they regularly used the internet but only 22% possessed a laptop PC. The "student laptop for 1 euro a year" scheme enables students wishing to do so to acquire a laptop from a wide range of models at competitive prices, with financing at preferential rates. All the partner financial institutions offer student loans for an amount equivalent to the purchase price of a PC, with repayment periods ranging from 12 to 36 months[15].

Each laptop has WiFi connectivity. Free access to the internet in WiFi zones is gradually being set up at each university. One month after the scheme was launched, 30,000 laptops had been bought. While 8% of students were equipped in September 2004, the figure had risen to 35% in September 2006. In 24 months, 450,000 laptops had been sold[16].

13. http://www.lausanne.ch/view.asp?DocId=29092
14. "2010, l'internet pour tous", Renaissance Numérique, March 2007; Government Digital Inclusion, Programs and Open Source Software: Technology Perspective, by Intel, May 2005, page 9; http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4D1/38/27.pdf, page 13.
15. Table of offers available online: http://delegation.internet.gouv.fr/mipe/banques.htm
16. "2010, l'internet pour tous", Renaissance Numérique, March 2007; http://delegation.internet.gouv.fr/mipe/projet.htm; http://delegation.internet.gouv.fr/mipe/actualite.htm

d. Ateliers du Bocage: creation of economic activity based on re-employment and recycling (France)

The Ateliers du Bocage ("Bocage Workshops") belong to the Social Economy and Integration branch of the charity Emmaus France. This French social integration enterprise works for companies and administrative departments. It collects and reprocesses many types of waste and materials (used printer cartridges, unused mobile telephones, used computer hardware, batteries, neon lights, used lamps). Since the end of 2006, it has entered into a partnership with FNAC to collect old mobile telephones and computers from people buying new devices and machines.

The Ateliers du Bocage have also set up at Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) an organisation that brings together three complementary activities under one roof: a workshop for dismantling and cleaning electronic and computer waste, an area for the sale of reconditioned IT equipment originating from France, and an internet space. The groups targeted by this initiative are jobseekers, other private individuals, schools and associations. The synergy thus created has generated 15 jobs and enabled schools and associations to be equipped[17].

3. Developing or maintaining public internet access points

The situation of public internet access points in Europe varies considerably. It is difficult to propose a single recommendation for countries like France, Belgium or the Nordic nations, which have for a long time been developing structured policies, quality labels, financing schemes, networking, etc, and the new entrants where the only services available are private.

For public internet access points or those operated by voluntary organisations, catering for a very disadvantaged group of people is generally a major problem. The economic vulnerability of these people calls for a large investment in human resources to recreate the social bond. The difficulties these individuals face are often quite different from merely learning computer skills and using the internet.

Apart from their two basic tasks of ensuring access and providing assistance, which are to be found in the various approaches employed throughout Europe, digital public spaces are also places of communication and socialisation and, as such, contribute to the resocialisation of socially excluded groups.

It is accordingly important in those countries that already have public access points to continue to maintain these schemes by networking access policies and access points. Public internet access points, which all too often are run like shops, must be part of a territorial approach.

For the countries without this type of arrangement or without the resources to introduce such a policy, it is possible to have recourse to private operators (call shops and other cybercafés). However, the same result should not be expected from them in terms of socialisation. The aim is simply, through a system of chequebooks or access vouchers financed by the towns or regions, to provide internet access without claiming to provide added educational value.

GOOD PRACTICES:

a. The Polish "Ikonk@" project: public internet access points in municipal libraries and community centres

The Polish Ministry of Scientific Research and Information Technology has launched "Ikonk@", a project with regional scope aimed at opening public internet access points in municipal libraries and community centres. The main objective is to equip small towns and villages with poor ICT access and low ICT use. This project seeks to alleviate problems created by the digital divide by providing free internet access and training in the use of IT and multimedia tools. More than 2,500 public internet access points have been created, each

17. http://www.oten.fr/spip.php?article4116 and http://www.ateliers-du-bocage.com

equipped with WiFi 802.11 b. The project is continuing and communities are still being equipped in a dozen or so regions[18].

b. An example of network rollout and efficient development: the "Picardie en Ligne 2.0" network (France)

In 1999, the Picardy Regional Council undertook a large-scale programme, entitled “Picardie en Ligne” (Picardy Online), to equip training centres for the use of the ICTs. Aiming to keep in touch with developments in the use of the ICTs so as to continue to meet the expectations of the region’s inhabitants, the Regional Council introduced an updated programme called “Picardie en Ligne 2.0”. In partnership with a large number of local players, it aids and supports a network of around a hundred public digital spaces (PDSs), which are free public web access points evenly spread over the Picardy region and offer all population groups a variety of training courses in the new multimedia uses.

The main aim of the scheme is to avoid a new digital divide brought about by the ICT services and their use. It places the designated spaces at the centre of a genuine process of digital regional development[19].

c. The Strasbourg Cybercentres, pursuing a popular education approach

Set up in 1997 at the instigation of Strasbourg mayor Catherine Trautmann, four cybercentres form part of a popular education project whose main priority is to give young people from deprived neighbourhoods a taste for out-of-school education. The aim is to enable them to familiarise themselves with the ICTs as a means of access to knowledge and culture and as a new way of practising citizenship. The Federation of Social Centres and the local youth offices have joined this scheme by participating in the development of public access points. The outcome of this initiative has been positive: an increase in the number of users, the acquisition of a knowledge of software and office automation and a trend among young people to use the hardware for leisure purposes[20].

d. “Cyberbuses”, reaching out to disadvantaged people (Guadeloupe, France)

The effectiveness of public internet access points in policies to combat the digital divide was recognised by all European states in the Riga Declaration. However, other measures to raise the awareness of the general public are possible. This especially applies to the “cyberbuses”, which make it possible to reach groups that are particularly cut off from the ICTs.

One example that might be mentioned is the French region of Guadeloupe, which launched a “cyberbus” scheme in 2003 to promote access to all the ICTs. Two specially fitted out and equipped trucks enable the population to familiarise themselves with computer tools and multimedia or improve their skills in this area. Instruction is provided by qualified individuals, which bolsters the awareness-raising approach.

Many European countries and regions have tried out “cyberbus” schemes, which are an effective strategy to combat the digital divide[21].

4. ICT training : prioritising value-added uses

Access to skills and their dissemination in society are the main causes of the digital divides, so training may be regarded as a possible means of overcoming this situation. However, the acquisition of ICT skills is never completed: technologies and their uses are evolving all the time and skills need to be permanently updated. This may be done by means of professional instruction or ICT immersion through personal use. However, for a large number of people who do not benefit from these supportive environments this cannot be taken for granted. A “learning to learn” attitude proves crucially important in ICT training.

18. http://www.iris-europe.eu/spip.php?article3492 (IRIS Europe 2007).
19. http://www.oten.fr/spip.php?article3728 .
20. “2010, l’internet pour tous”, Renaissance Numérique, March 2007
21. http://www.iris-europe.eu/spip.php?article3492 (IRIS Europe 2007)

The desire for social integration has a fundamental influence on an individual's motivation to participate in ICT training. This also means that if people who are not very motivated are given ICT training there is a danger that it will not result in a genuine improvement in the level of ICT use. In addition, mental blocks concerning technological tools are often linked to a lack of confidence and self-esteem, so it is important to take this factor into account in the design and implementation of training courses.

Training to use the ICTs is not an end in itself but a means of achieving societal objectives of a more cross-cutting nature. Courses that offer the best results are those that adopt a project-based approach and re-employ the ICTs as tools to support an activity with a social dimension (such as collecting material on the history of one's neighbourhood, producing a family tree, recording one's knowledge of cookery, communicating with one's grandchildren, etc). In the same way, the ICTs can be integrated into other courses (languages, etc).

Accordingly, making content available proves just as important for developing the most relevant uses, ensuring greater autonomy for the citizens and encouraging discussion.

GOOD PRACTICES:

a. A portable virtual office on a memory stick for each upper secondary school student and apprentice (France)

Since 1998, the Regional Council of Ile-de-France has made support for the development of ICT use one of its priorities, and work has focused on that development following a stage involving the provision of equipment. Against the background of a highly "digitised" society (a trend destined to increase with the "knowledge-based society"), the Regional Council's aim is to offer young people from upper secondary school onwards the opportunity to familiarise themselves with information in all its forms.

For example, at the start of the 2007-2008 school year, all fifth-year pupils as well as apprentices at training centres of the region's public educational institutions (255,000 students in all) received a 1GB memory stick. With GNU/GPL licensed software, it is a portable digital virtual office designed to reduce the digital divide and promote free software.

The project's objective is threefold: a) social integration, since it will be based more and more on the triad consisting of good qualifications, ICT proficiency and a command of languages; b) democratisation, since the school is the only place where the use of the ICTs can reduce the social and digital divides while at the same time maintaining a critical approach; c) society itself, since the digital work environment (DWE) will facilitate parental involvement in their children's education. Furthermore, active learning, experiment, document search and retrieval and a creative approach make it possible to ensure that education is not only the transmission of knowledge but also emancipation and the building of citizenship. This type of initiative can easily be copied in any other region[22].

b. "La Source", an independent distributor of digital content in Mali

The aim of this project is to distribute free software cheaply, together with other resources, such as books, Wikipedia, documentaries, educational resources and local artists' video clips. Its operation is simple: the service is designed like a kiosk and users navigate the menus with the aid of three buttons and select the content they want to transfer to a memory stick. A small charge is made for each transaction as a contribution towards maintaining the search engine.

"La Source" meets a need for the distribution of content that is both inexpensive and accessible to as many people as possible. Although internet connections are becoming more widely available in Mali, they are still inaccessible to most people and the only alternative is to use the cybercafés. However, not everyone can afford to download the 500MB Wikipedia in a cybercafé. Moreover, people are very often unaware that free and good-quality software and resources exist and are available to everyone. These are all impediments to

22. http://www.iris-europe.eu/spip.php?article3775 (IRIS Europe 2007)

the distribution of free resources that “La Source” intends to eliminate.[23]

5. Standardising digital training services in Europe

The implementation of ICT training measures, which are tending to become more and more widespread (for different posts and levels of qualification), increases a person’s chances of redeployment after being made redundant and facilitates the possible upgrading of posts for certain categories (such as manual labourers or white-collar employees).

It is also necessary for training courses to be recognised from one region and one country to another. Europe has a role to play in this respect by proposing universal reference systems and the recognition of training provided at public internet access points.

GOOD PRACTICES:

Tim P@SS: passport for the ICTs

In order to combat the digital divide and supplement the existing training available in the new technologies, France’s Nord–Pas de Calais region has introduced Tim P@SS, a cultural product available to all. The scheme enables anyone who wishes to do so to receive free instruction in the ICTs (basic introduction to micro-computing and the internet) in 7 modules. This “passport” is available to everyone, in particular the people most cut off from technology and training (especially jobseekers, adults or out-of-school young people).

The aims of the scheme are as follows: a) acquisition of basic skills and a minimum proficiency in handling multimedia tools; b) the possibility of offering everyone the opportunity to acquire the technical knowledge and skills necessary for civic and cultural use of the technologies; c) a drive to raise the level of proven knowledge and skills.

The results are positive: as of 20 July 2007, 32,861 individuals had followed the TIM P@SS programme, with more women (19,711, 13,744 of them over 45) than men. Jobseekers accounted for a large proportion of those trained but Tim P@ss also reached people in employment (6,809 individuals) and housewives (1,166).

The project is being copied in other French regions. Consideration can therefore be given to standardisation of the training offered and better recognition between regions[24].

6. Online public services designed for all target groups

Online services are a key aspect of the development of e-inclusion. There is no use without a service, and public bodies are among the providers of key services. Good public online services inevitably result in high-quality use likely to contribute to greater social inclusion. This is achieved by raising the quality of the services offered with respect to accessibility, usability and affordability (three characteristics that need to be differentiated). Behind this idea are the concepts of service design (especially “design for all”) and universality with regard to technical and ergonomic design.

Much more than enabling people with disabilities to access the web, the accessibility recommendations of the World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) are rules that benefit everyone and constitute sources of increased effectiveness as far as websites are concerned. For example, they make it possible to guarantee that the websites can be used whatever the workstation’s configuration. The navigator can be configured to display the pages without pictures (thus increasing the surfing speed). In this case, the alternative text appears instead of the picture and enables the surfer to obtain the information. These recommendations thus ensure the better portability of sites over all display devices (an important fact considering the rapid spread of mobile terminals).

23. http://www.nord-internet-solidaire.org/spip.php?article2426 and http://lasource.kunnafoni.org
24. http://www.nordpasdecalais.fr/Tim_Pass/intro.htm

Since the eEurope 2002 plan, which was confirmed by the eEurope 2005 plan, the European Commission has made the ability of people with disabilities and the elderly to access the information society a priority of its work.

Several European countries (such as Italy, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain and Sweden) have already passed a law requiring all public websites to be accessible to all users. It should be noted that the British law applies to both public and private sites. In the United States, this acknowledgment of the need for accessibility has existed since 1999 through section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The harmonisation of national accessibility guidelines – or, in other words, the use of the same set of accessibility recommendations - is essential for a number of reasons:

- the need to clarify the notion of accessibility, which is still not well understood;
- the need to enable websites to be harmonised on a common basis. For example, what makes a site supposedly accessible in France not accessible in Germany or vice versa?
- the need to ensure that training on compliance with the accessibility recommendations is facilitated and the costs of training limited, these conditions being necessary if the largest possible number of individuals are to be trained;
- the need to ensure that web page design tools can take account of the accessibility rules (one cannot reasonably imagine the possibility of there being as many variations of a product or of an accessibility option in a product as sets of guidelines).

This question arises both for the authorities, as providers of content and services, and for private operators, who should be made more aware of what is required, especially with regard to encouraging the involvement of users in the development of online services.

FURTHER ASPECTS

Web 2.0 and its use by the general public

The internet is seeing the development of a new generation of platforms and services. Often referred to as Web 2.0, they are mainly characterised by interactivity, the formation of communities, collaborative tools, self-produced and shared content and an ever more present video component. The corresponding uses are enjoying significant success in Europe. For example, communication via social networking is now in 3rd place in uses of the web at European level (Source: “Europe : les usages du Web par les internautes”, Le Journal du Net, November 2007). The “industrial” counterpart to Web 2.0 might also be emphasised by mentioning the initial national and international successes of innovative start-ups, such as DailyMotion, Netvibes, vpod.tv, Kewego, etc.

These new uses are interesting when it comes to tackling the digital divide – especially the gap between the generations – as they lead to a snowball effect and a new incentive to “get connected” for individuals who have until now not found sufficient motivation to cross the internet threshold. Accordingly, the phenomenon of user generated and shared content (blogs, photographs, videos, etc) can play a particular role in dealing with the digital divide. It is mainly self-produced digital content that is not available by means of the “traditional” media (radio, television, paper, etc) and is only accessible via the internet. These types of use can play a specific role in providing incentives to attract individuals who would otherwise be kept apart from a community (family, friends, clubs and societies, fellow hobbyists, etc). One example of this group is grandparents who, like other family members connected up to the web, want to enjoy photos, videos or blogs about their grandchildren shared on the internet.

Web 2.0 is therefore worth promoting, not only because of its “industrial” aspects (company creation) but also its potential role in narrowing the digital divide.

GOOD PRACTICES:

a. AnySurfer: making the internet more accessible to people with disabilities (Flanders, Belgium)

AnySurfer (which replaced BlindSurfer on 1 July 2006) describes itself as "the Belgian label of quality for accessible websites". The difficulties experienced by visually impaired, blind or elderly people are often dealt with in the website rules but it is important to stress that AnySurfer also pays due regard to the accessibility of users with reduced mobility as well as those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Since January 2008, the AnySurfer network has brought together several Belgian organisations that now co-operate with one another to improve the AnySurfer rules. Together, these organisations intend to increase their effectiveness with regard to improving the accessibility standards by offering training, advice, website screenings, etc. One of the main aims of this collaboration is to set out the rules on content, which need to be improved in order to provide a guarantee that text published on the internet can be easily read and understood. The alternatives to sound-based content will also be mentioned. Furthermore, these associations plan to highlight this problem through awareness campaigns in the media.

AnySurfer is currently a partner in the Euracert project (www.euracert.org), which links together France, Spain and Belgium[25].

b. Section 47 of the French law of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities

This law on the participation and citizenship of people with disabilities states that "the online public communication services of central government departments, local and regional authorities and the public institutions attached to them should be accessible to the disabled". Digital accessibility becomes an eligibility criterion in the case of responses to public invitations to tender for the development of digital services or software when these invitations refer to the specifications of the "accessibility guidelines".

In February 2004, before the introduction of section 47, the Agency for the Development of e-Administration (Agence pour le Développement de l'Administration Electronique – ADAE) launched the "accessibility guidelines of the French administration's internet services", which adopts all the criteria of the AccessiWeb quality label (introduced by the French association Braillenet). This makes it possible to assess a website's accessibility according to the international WAI recommendations. In the presentation of its "accessibility guidelines", the ADAE states that "the deadlines for the adoption of the international guidelines (in particular the W3C's WCAG 2.0 requirements) specify the immediate publication of national guidelines. The criteria for these are expected to change from time to time so that they converge towards the international guidelines, especially those of the W3C/WAI (WCAG 2.0)."

7. Informing the public, reducing psychological obstacles and reaching out to disadvantaged groups

Overcoming the psychological barriers is just as important as solving the problems in accessing the network and the necessary equipment since the digital divide is not only material in nature but also a question of mindsets.

Many situations responsible for the digital divide are based on perceptions on the part of non-users, who may feel the internet was not set up for them, that they will not be capable of using a computer or that they run the risk of disturbing or breaking something.

The ICTs are a component of the socio-cultural status and a motivating factor for social inclusion. It is important to find solutions adapted to each situation and each disability. Additional efforts are required to identify the most sensitive areas and avoid a generalist approach.

[25] www.anysurfer.be

This may involve specifically targeting the group of non-internet users (housewives, jobseekers, senior citizens, etc) and having the information disseminated via the media that are most likely to reach them.

b. The Agora cyberspace of Emmaus Paris: an internet access space for "persons of no fixed abode"

In November 2003, the "Agora" day centre of the Emmaus charity, which had received a grant from Microsoft, opened a cyberspace designed for people of no fixed abode. Run by volunteers, it provides free access on a self-service basis and provides disadvantaged men and women with IT and internet training. This means that a particular category of people (the unemployed, poor, homeless, etc) can familiarise themselves with the use of computers, develop their skills and access the internet.

In its first year, the self-service facility received 3,000 users, 700 individuals followed various training courses and 866 email boxes were opened. 40 persons a day use the cyberspace and 45 have been able to find work[26].

c. Point Relais Services d'Hondschoote: local public service agency in a rural environment (France)

This is a pilot scheme that provides rural populations with better access to administrative services and public bodies through the use of the ICTs.

Set up in 1999, its aim is to offer the area's inhabitants the possibility of contacting, from their own administrative centre, various public services to deal with administrative formalities from a distance. In addition to personal help from an assistant, the internet access points made available permit online access to the Department's public service partners: ANPE (the national employment agency), ASSEDIC (unemployment insurance agency), Caisse d'Allocations familiales (child benefit), Caisse Primaire d'Assurance Maladie (health insurance), Mutualité sociale Agricole (farmers' social insurance) and the sub-prefecture.

The services provided by Point Relais Services d'Hondschoote can also be reached from the internet access points at each local town hall in the area during the usual opening hours. These access points can put the user in direct contact by video conference with the Point Relais Services d'Hondschoote and the various partners. This scheme, one aim of which is to open up the region, is part of a European cross-border programme run jointly with Kent County Council (in the south of England)[27].

d. Women on the information superhighways

For fifteen years, the Antwerp (Belgium) Women's Intercultural Centre (IVCA) has been organising training courses and meetings for women of various origins suffering from some form of social isolation. From experience, the non-profit-making IVCA is aware that computer courses for poorly educated women are not always "open to all". The association plans to devise a scheme that employs a dedicated practical forum. The aim of this approach is to make courses accessible to everyone and distribute the user's manual among the organisations working with the same target group. The project will be carried out in 2008 with the support of the Telenet Foundation (Belgium) (http://www.telenetfoundation.be).

8. Adopting a sustainable approach to the information society

In addition to the issues of digital divides and e-inclusion, there is the matter of what information society model is desirable. A sustainable information society approach means not only carrying out sustainable digital projects and policies but also harnessing the ICTs for the benefit of human development and the sustainable

26. http://www.nord-internet-solidaire.org/?article723 and http://www.paris.fr/portail/Solidarites/Portal.lut?page_id=5406&document_type_id=5&document_id=8637&portlet_id=11636

27. http://www.nord-internet-solidaire.org/?article1112 and http://www.cg59.fr/FrontOffice/AfficheArticle.aspx?IdArticle=2065

development of regions and countries. In essence, this means considering the digital divide from the point of view of sustainable development and, in particular, its social pillar.

In order to ensure that everyone has their place in this information society under construction it is also necessary to guarantee individual freedoms, reposition the economic players (in these times of financial crisis, government action enjoys full legitimacy again), make the public interest the focus of concerns and develop a model of society that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of further generations to meet their own needs", according to the definition of sustainable development in the Brundlandt report[28].

One way of developing a sustainable information society approach is the establishment of local digital agendas, that is to say home-grown strategies for the development of the information society. This would include projects (if possible joint projects between various local authorities) drawn up for and with the citizens in order to meet their needs and expectations as far as possible.

GOOD PRACTICES:

a. Digital local agendas

A digital local agenda is a strategic plan centred on the development of the information society in one area in particular, "a common strategy for the development of the Information Society, a project shared with citizens that responds to their needs and hopes, which bears in mind the socio-economic, cultural and institutional specifics of each city or region and contributes to the reinforcement of policies and actions aimed at achieving sustainable development (economic growth, culture and identity, social cohesion, environment) and which will benefit greater development for the cities or regions' citizens, especially for the most disadvantaged groups".[29]

Conclusion

The recommendations made in this report can be set out in different orders. The order proposed is a logical progression: it begins with access, which is then followed by training and, finally, by more general aspects of e-government. Having internet access and a digital terminal (fixed or mobile) is a necessary element but is by no means sufficient to construct an e-inclusion policy. There is no point in these various recommendations unless they are implemented parallel to one another.

Another way of addressing these various recommendations is to consider the territorial level to which they apply:

	Europe	States	Regions	Towns
1. Universal internet access at the "right speed"	x	x	x	
2. Digital terminals available to all			x	x
3. Developing or maintaining public internet access points			x	x
4. ICT training : prioritising value-added uses		x	x	
5. Standardising digital training services in Europe	x	x		
6. Online public services designed for all target groups	x	x	x	x
7. Informing the public, reducing the psychological obstacles and reaching out to disadvantaged groups		x	x	
8. Adopting a sustainable approach to the information society	x	x	x	

28. http://www.worldinbalance.net/agreements/1987-brundtland.php
29. http://www.ictseminar.org/NetGrowth/ICTWorkshop/FAQ_Global.asp?CategoryID=NETa05&PartnerLong=NetGrowth&Language=English

In all cases, an overarching approach is necessary to reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of the digital divide. Sustainable and effective solutions are those that are incorporated into an integrated network or "ecosystem", taking due account of the technical aspects of the ICTs as well as the social dimension of the digital divide. The ultimate objective is very much social in nature: there is no point in narrowing the digital divide and developing e-inclusion unless this makes it possible to strengthen the social bond and enhance the inclusion of everyone in society.