CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF EUROPE

Recommendation 54 (1999)[1]
on local and regional information society

(Extract from the Official Gazette *of the Council of Europe – June 1999)*

The Congress,

Having regard to:

1.   The report presented by Mr Risto Koivisto (Finland) on behalf of the Working Group on "Local and Regional Information society";

2.   The results of a series of seminars that the CLRAE has organised on Local and Regional Information Society, dealing with public policy's role in the promotion of information society applications as well as the practical reality of information society for business, public administration and citizens;

3.   The Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on a European Policy for New Information Technologies, adopted on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Council of Europe;

Considering that:

4.   The global information society is rapidly developing, giving more and more people access to information cheaply on a worldwide scale. The result is globalisation of both benefits and problems;

5.   The political, economic and social impacts of the information society are manifold and in many respect still unforeseen. It is clear that in order to create a fair operating environment for all, governments must agree globally on practices and norms when using new information and communication technologies;

6.   Concrete actions to increase public awareness and understanding of the opportunities, benefits and possible risks are needed. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary covering issues of technology, economy, social and societal aspects, education and training, people's patterns of behaviour, values and motivation;

7.   The information society's role in employment, quality of life of the citizens, environment, transport, healthcare, renewal of public administrations and service provision and a stronger participation of the citizens in local decision making are examples of issues that require immediate attention and practical action;

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1. Debated by the Congress and adopted on 16 June 1999, 2nd sitting (see doc. CG (6) 3 draft Recommendation, presented by Mr R. Koivisto, Rapporteur).

8.   There is a general desire to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration, as well as the quality of its services. People, or in this context the customers, do not want to pay more for poor services. To improve the quality of services, public, private, academic and community organisations should work together to bring all their resources to bear in some kind of a common strategy;

9.   Many citizens wish to participate more in matters which greatly affect their lives and their future. Information technology may have an important role in that respect, but deep changes in established systems of governance should not occur too rapidly and are unlikely to do so;

10.   Although practical information society applications do not require large amounts of public funding, public authorities do have a responsibility in establishing the enabling conditions for their development. Whilst the infrastructure requirements should generally be met by telecommunication operators, support may be necessary in the more remote regions to ensure their full access to modern information technology systems;

11.   The benefits and the opportunities of the information society should be accessible to all Europeans,

Calls on the governments of Member states to:

12.   Elaborate national plans and strategies for the transition to the information society in each of their countries according to their national priorities. This should include:

– arrangements for awareness raising which must be done in the local language;

– arrangements for education and lifelong training of the motivated members of the population;

– methods for public consultation on important (e.g. regulatory) issues;

– and perhaps most important of all, actions which will help information society to flourish;

13.   Provide universal service, if necessary by imposing the obligation on particular operators for providing this. Since this involves not only making access universally available but also offering it at an affordable price, each country is required to decide, according to national requirements, on the scheme to be used to achieve universal service;

14.   Ensure that areas of societal interest, for instance healthcare, education and training, the environment, employment systems or public administrations also benefit from the information society. If the development of the information society is entirely left to the private sector, a number of public areas risk being left out because they lack the prospect of sufficient profits. This would be particularly damaging as the new technology can increase government openness as well as the cost-efficiency of public services;

15.   Play an active role in designing special schemes, tailor-made to support complex multisectoral actions. This implies encouraging the transfer of experience and

understanding through the application of appropriate funding instruments, as well as developing a capacity to advise and encourage in practical ways on how to meet the challenge of change ;

16. Raise awareness of the importance of the information society in all European countries and at all levels of government, ranging from awareness campaigns to specific pilot actions in application areas ;

17. Provide financial support for selected information society actions. The initiatives supported should meet the criteria of having a direct impact on raising awareness and optimising the socio-economic benefits of information society development in Europe ;

18. Elaborate a European information technology charter to establish a set of principles on problems such as the protection of minors, standards for international commerce, taxation, consumer protection, copyright, data protection, cryptography and many other issues. Electronic commerce makes new requirements for governments' basic activities and these requirements can be met only by means of extensive international co-operation ;

19. Facilitate local and regional authorities and their national associations in addressing their views about the development of the European information society to national governments and to European organisations ;

20. Inform, encourage and assist European local and regional authorities in their efforts to play a significant role in the construction of the information society at local and regional levels. In particular, assistance is required in the following areas :

– information : provide accurate information to local and regional authorities on international programmes concerning the information society, on opportunities regarding project funding and on the use of information and communication technology in local and regional public administration ;

– partnership : help local and regional authorities to find suitable partners for their information society projects in other European countries and facilitate local and regional authorities' participation in transnational projects ;

– exchange of experience : develop and promote the ongoing exchange of experience, arising from the development of the information society at the local and regional levels in member states ;

21. Use new information and communication technologies to strengthen democratic governance and its legitimacy, to promote values like openness, transparency and accountability of administration. New technologies can play a role in the following areas :

– provision by parliaments, governments and public agencies of information for citizens, public and private institutions ;

– enhanced interaction between politicians and citizens ;

– closer guidance of elected representatives and governments by public involvement, especially in the legislative periods between elections ;

– initiatives which aim to promote public debate and communication on matters of general concern, including information and communication technology applications to citizen participation in governance and direct democracy ;

– electronic voting (a) to select candidates in elections (b) on laws and public issues ;

– direct decision-making by citizens on at least some issues ;

– gradual transformation of representative "delegatory" democracy into a process with more deliberation and more involvement of citizens ;

22. Help the authorities of the new democracies of Central and easternEurope to overcome the main barriers of developing the information society in these countries, i.e.:

– lack of an efficient communication infrastructure ;

– undue centralisation and difficulties in applying the subsidiarity principle ;

– complexity of administrative structures ;

– lack of communication and co-ordination between institutions ;

– low level of awareness at all levels of government ;

– lack of strategic thinking and behaviour ;

23. Invest in training for an information technology literate population that will be able to make full use the new technologies ; Help them work together to improve their communities, to utilise all the services that soon will be available online, to gain employment and to develop their businesses, and to make the use of information technology as natural a part of their everyday lives as is the telephone ;

24. Initiate partnerships between different interests at national, regional and local levels to develop projects of mutual benefit ;

25. Ensure that the various information society projects taking place all over Europe support and help each other, and highlight the important role such projects are playing in putting the new information and communication technologies into the hands of ordinary people.