

CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF EUROPE

Resolution 76 (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. For the citizen, modern information and communication technology, especially computer networks such as the Internet, have vastly increased the speed and volume of communication, and the ease of access to information;
5. The development of global information technology suggests a lot more than new and more effective means for communication : information society will have a general influence on our lives, private and public, including our work, community and leisure activities. It will also bring new opportunities and challenges for the development of municipalities and regions;
6. The development of the information society will not only result in globalisation, but also in decentralisation, where initiatives are taken at the grassroots level, and action develops from bottom up. The role of municipalities and regions is fundamental in this process ; it is largely their duty to create the enabling conditions for information society to develop in the right direction ;
7. In most European countries there is a sharp decline in financial transfers from central government to regional and local government, as well as an increasing requirement for

public sector fiscal discipline. At the same time the quality of the services provided needs to be maintained and customer oriented services and citizens’ access to information need to be improved ;

8. The cost and difficulty of providing public services in rural or sparsely populated areas is still greater : limited labour markets make it difficult to maintain private sector economic activities and the emigration of the workforce further weakens economic potential ;
9. In many countries there is a low participation of citizens in public life through existing systems of representative democracy. Before the emergence of new information and communication technologies it seemed impractical or even impossible to design and operate a system in which every citizen has the right to co-decide on issues of public concern ;

Stressing that :

10. Information society applications can provide a solution to these problems, as they make it easier to implement radical innovations in the provision of public services : by an integrated delivery of services ; by distance learning and other remote services (for example in medical diagnostics or legal services) ; by the remote provision of cultural and other personal and leisure services ; and by teleworking to compensate for narrow labour markets ;
11. Future economic and social well-being depends on how the public and the authorities optimise use of the new information technology : contributing to a more balanced regional development by allowing more remote areas of Europe access to social, cultural and economic life at the local, regional, national and international levels ;
12. Information society may extensively change the ways in which governments work and may alter the relationship between elected representatives and administrations. The “informatisation” of government and administration has considerable implications for the citizen : There may be benefits in terms of ease of citizens’ access to delegates, officials and to various forms of public information ;
13. This can be seen as a possibility for a new kind of participation at the local level, as a tool to combine the traditional representative democratic system with the network-based direct participation system, allowing citizens to have a direct say in public matters effecting them. It offers the chance for citizens to begin to take over more responsibility for collective decisions, so reducing the need for indirect representation and allowing decisions, whether they be delegated or taken directly, to reflect more closely the will of constituents ;
14. New information technologies when properly used can in particular offer possibilities to :
 - provide for a broader participation of all citizens at the grassroots level in the decisions concerning them ;
 - improve the performance and efficiency of government services ;
 - contribute to the enhancement of public services ;

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

- enable better communication between the public and the government ;
- increase transparency and access to public information.

15. If these new services can only be used by a minority of the population, it will not only limit the effectiveness of the services, it will also result in increasing social exclusion. It is going to be much more difficult for the great majority of the population who are unused to working with computers to benefit from the new possibilities offered. Clearly there is an urgent need to build the computer skills of the population as a whole.

Calls on local and regional authorities to :

16. Consider the role of information technology in reforming services offered by public administrations and their agencies. Local and regional authorities should lead the way to information society with high quality and confidence building examples of public services : They should act as frontline change agents and play a visible role in raising awareness of the benefits information society may offer ;

17. Make public administration more effective, open and transparent by using possibilities offered by new information and communication technologies, by improving ICT competence at local and regional levels, by taking full advantage of public information resources and by making them easily accessible to all citizens through public information networks. Fair and equal access to open networks is a prerequisite to ensure that the potential and benefits of free information flow are gained ;

18. Prevent the creation of a two-tier information society, in which only part of the population has access to new services and is comfortable using them. Local and regional authorities should be aware of the dangers and challenges these developments represent : The division of society into first- and second-class citizens, in accordance with their means and competencies for using new technologies is a real danger which has to be prevented by all means ;

19. Increase equality both between individuals and different regions, and to enhance openness and transparency in the governance and administration by the careful use of new information technologies ; Make sure that all potential users, whether persons or businesses, in all municipalities and regions of Europe, enjoy the benefits of the new technologies. It is particularly crucial that small and medium-sized enterprises – and not only large corporations – make full use of the new technologies ;

20. Develop partnerships between the different tiers of government as well as between the authorities, the public and the businesses. This mission requires European level co-operation and supportive actions : Every European region and municipality should have its own plans for co-operation and exchange of information, brokerage of ideas, applications and best practices, as well as for managing focused project programmes ;

21. Launch awareness raising activities on the opportunities and impacts of the development of new information technologies. Such processes, programmes,

events and other actions should promote all cities and regions to take benefit of the information society development. These actions are also necessary in providing prerequisites for public administrations, the private sector and all individuals to make their moves ;

22. Establish public consultation forums consisting of representatives of the different social groups, users, content and service providers, network operators, equipment manufacturers and institutions, to discuss social, cultural, political and economic aspects of the development of the information society and its implications in the following areas :

- employment and job creation ;
- social and democratic values, and the future of new services and the media ;
- universal access and consumer protection and support ;
- sustainability in an information society ;
- public services : bringing administration closer to citizens ;
- lifelong learning ;

23. Rethink outdated attitudes and working methods in all public organisations : Although the technology available today has great potential, if it is simply applied to established ways of living and working, much of that potential may be lost ;

24. Help citizens to discover new ways of improving the quality of their private and working lives, by investing in education and training systems that enhance human capabilities and by supporting cultural and social attitudes which are friendly to information technologies. It has to be ensured that everybody has the basic skills to use services offered by the networked information society : Electronic mail, information services, electronic commerce and new services provided for citizens by administrations should be widely available ;

25. Provide online networking opportunities for local communities, as well as a whole range of public access points which anyone can use and which must be free or at least affordable to all. In the long term everyone should be able to access cyberspace from their own home so that it becomes as much a part of everyone's life as the telephone ;

26. Support the development of information society in the least favoured rural areas, for example by promoting the establishment of telecottages, which aim to provide under one roof a range of local services based around computers and telecommunications : Training, a computerised workplace, childcare, business services, social events and networking opportunities, which all create synergies to stimulate small rural enterprise and new ways of working ;

27. 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 contribute as follows :

- helping to alert and inform about public issues, also facilitating debate ;

- improving knowledge about candidates for elected office and other public jobs, e.g. revealing their qualifications and political knowledge, previous performance and which interest group they support;
- allowing the voter to vote in a more informed and critical way;
- enabling the citizen between elections to join in a public debate more easily, to intervene by influencing public opinion and decisions and to monitor election promises;

- allowing members of political parties to judge better the performance of their own delegates and candidates for public office;
- encouraging and helping to empower citizens to be pro-active. Forms of expression may be lobbying, informing and educating others via online publishing, moral appeals, protest and social movements, “non-governmental” organising or starting referenda.