

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 282 (2009)¹ The digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions

1. In Europe today, there are large gaps between different population groups in terms of access to the information and communication technologies (ICTs) – symbolised by the Internet as well as by mobile terminals such as mobile phones – as well as their distribution and use.

2. These gaps in access to ICTs are the result of different demographic and socio-occupational factors (age, gender, family composition, level of education, income, occupational category) and are reinforced by the exclusion which ensues. Geographical and geopolitical variables (differences between urban and rural areas, between regions or between countries, between North and South) also reinforce these inequalities.

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

4. The concept of e-inclusion therefore sets out to be positive. It raises the issue of equality of access to the “information society” or “knowledge society”. This concept is multi-dimensional; it embodies the right of every citizen to access to ICTs, knowledge acquisition and information.

5. In this connection, public authorities have a great responsibility and a fundamental role to play as decision makers, suppliers of essential services – online services being a key element in the development of e-inclusion – and driving forces for change.

6. Public authorities will also be increasingly called upon to use ICTs to enhance the democratic conduct of public affairs and its legitimacy, which will depend directly on the number of their “cyber-citizens”.

7. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is convinced that it is essential to understand and address the challenges involved in the rapid growth of the ICTs and to eliminate at all costs the current and future risk of our societies being divided according to the means and ability of citizens to use them.

8. In the light of the foregoing, the Congress calls on the regional authorities of the Council of Europe member states to proceed actively with their efforts to promote e-inclusion, and in particular to:

a. ensure both a sustainable approach to the information society and a better response to citizens’ needs and

expectations by developing regional digital agendas which take due account of the following elements:

i. the recommendations of i2010, the European Commission’s initiative laying down policy guidelines for the information society and the media and the European Ministerial e-Inclusion Conference on 30 November to 2 December 2008, in Vienna;

ii. the participation of citizens in projects designed for and with them;

iii. access, for which purpose the regions should:

– pursue balanced development of telecommunications infrastructure as an essential but not exclusive element of e-inclusion;

– develop and organise the provision of affordable or free public access to the Internet by maintaining, on the one hand, free public access points in countries where they exist and, on the other, in the case of countries not having this type of arrangement or lacking the resources to introduce such a policy, by relying on private operators to facilitate Internet access through a chequebook or access voucher system funded by cities or regions;

– make digital terminals available to all by introducing a policy of re-use of the equipment of the regional authority and the institutions run by it (schools, hospitals, etc.), particularly for the benefit of low-income households, for whom the purchase of a computer remains an obstacle to e-inclusion;

iv. accessibility, for which purpose the regions should:

– ensure that all sites run by them comply with accessibility standards and give proper consideration to the design and user-friendliness of these online services;

– promote increased awareness among the region’s private operators, for example by including certain accessibility requirements in public procurement contracts;

v. evolving training provision, and for this purpose:

– offer, at public Internet access points or through other learning arrangements, opportunities for training in the ICTs permitting the development of value-added uses of ICTs and geared to clearly defined needs on the part of the target groups;

– make available free content enabling citizens to develop the most relevant uses, giving them greater autonomy and promoting exchanges;

vi. public information and awareness-raising, and for this purpose:

– implement a policy of public information on the benefits of ICTs, linking them with the concerns of the target groups (information, education, employment, etc.);

– endeavour to reach and raise the awareness of the people with least access to ICTs, reaching out to them with initiatives such as the “cyberbus” and developing longer-term ICT support for vulnerable groups;

b. bear in mind the need for a cross-disciplinary approach and consideration of the different implications of the digital divide, and incorporate a concern for e-inclusion in

other regional policies (culture, education, health, welfare, etc.).

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Regions on 4 March 2009 and adopted by the Congress on 5 March 2009, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPR(16)1REP, explanatory memorandum, rapporteur: J.-M. Bourjac (France, R, SOC)).