An Information Society Open to All

Will information and communication technologies enrich and empower the lives of vulnerable groups or become an additional obstacle for them?

Millions of EU citizens are not yet able to reap the full benefits of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Older persons, people with disabilities and people living in remote rural areas are among the ones at risk of being left behind.

We must be vigilant as these technologies, which promise to connect us, also risk creating a social divide between those who can access and use them and those who cannot.

eAccessibility: Access for All

In practical terms, the **eAccessibility** priority is to ensure that disadvantaged groups can access the same services as everyone else. It is also proven that for example highly accessible websites, designed to be navigable by people with disabilities, are generally easier to navigate for others as well.

eEurope Priorities

The **eEurope 2002 Action Plan** in the e-Accessibility area concentrated mainly on actions to promote Design-for-all (DfA) approaches and the adoption of the Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines for public websites.

The **eEurope 2005 Action Plan** identified new challenges related to the *social* and *regional* aspects of an inclusive Information Society.

The access of all citizens to goods, services and information depends on:

- the accessibility of public websites;
- including accessibility requirements in public procurement;
- a European curriculum in Design-for-All;
- accessibility measures within eGovernment, eHealth and eLearning programmes.

Making the benefits of ICT available to the largest possible number of people is a social and ethical imperative.

Uneven national progress

Implementation of previous policy initiatives relating to eAccessibility has been rather uneven across the EU. Some countries have gone further than others in implementing them.

Denmark and Ireland, for instance, are promoting the use of nationally-developed 'public procurement toolkits' to foster the use of e-accessible goods and services in their public administrations and hope they will be taken up in the private sector.

However citizens would benefit more if the development of national schemes (e.g. in public procurement) was co-ordinated EU-wide.

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eEurope at a Glance

The eEurope initiative was launched in June 2000 to speed up Europe's transition towards a knowledge-based economy and to realize its potentials of higher growth, more jobs and better access for all citizens to the new services of the information age.

The eEurope 2002 Action Plan – included 4 targets on accessibility. eEurope 2005 was launched in June 2002 to promote a secure broadband infrastructure, eBusiness and public online services (eHealth, eLearning and eGovernment).

The new strategic framework, **i2010 – European Information Society 2010**, promotes an open and competitive digital economy and emphasizes ICT as a driver of inclusion and quality of life.

What has been achieved so far?

Key achievements of eEurope:

- eInclusion has been adopted as an objective of the European Social Inclusion Strategy.
- In 1999 the EU set up a High Level Group on the Employment and Social Dimension of the Information Society (ESDIS).
- EU Member States and institutions have agreed to adopt the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines for their public websites.
- The Commission is continuously co-ordinating the identification, monitoring, benchmarking and data collection of eAccessibility best practice.
- eAccessibility standardization initiatives have been launched in co-operation with various European standards bodies.
- A European Design-for-All Network (EDeAN www.e-accessibility.org) has been established, involving national centres of excellence in the Member States. Design-for-All standards for accessibility of information technology products have been published.

Design-for-All (DfA)

The most **cost-effective and non-discriminatory** form of access to ICTs is through the Design-for-All process, where mainstream products and services are designed to be used by as many people as possible regardless of their age and ability.

Other activities

The **eInclusion@EU** project aims to establish a framework for scientific and user inputs to European policy-making for eInclusion and eAccessibility and identify new and innovative policy approaches. It is to generate policy proposals that are well grounded and practicable.

The Commission is supporting three projects on web accessibility benchmarking. The need to monitor the accessibility of public websites arises from the fact that several Member States have binding legislation requiring accessibility and must assess sites' compliance.

More widely, eInclusion is becoming a concern within growing numbers of activities in the EU. Network access issues, for example, are also being tackled by policies for remote and rural areas.

i2010 initiative

The new five-year strategy (2005-2010) recognizes that Information Society is moving from a "pilot phase" to a "wide deployment" as the ICT world matures. It promotes an open and competitive digital economy and emphasises ICT as a driver of inclusion and quality of life. In this context the following three policy priorities have been identified:

- the completion of a Single European Information Space;
- strengthening Innovation and Investment in ICT research;
- achieving an Inclusive European Information Society that promotes growth and jobs, in a manner that is consistent with sustainable development and that gives priority to better public services and higher quality of life

One of the pillars of the new i2010 initiative is thus **eInclusion** – meaning the ability and willingness of individuals and communities to participate in the information society. It tackles both the removal of barriers and the empowering of people to take part in and actively benefit from the knowledge-based society and economy.

New proposals

On 13 September 2005 the Commission adopted a **Communication on eAccessibility**.
The Communication focuses on three approaches to foster accessibility: public procurement, certification of ICT products and services, and the use of existing legislation. These actions will ensure that large groups of Europeans will not be excluded from the benefits of the information society.

Further Information

- **eInclusion & eAccessibility**
  http://europa.eu.int/information_society/policy/accessibility/index_en.htm

- **Europe's Information Society: Thematic Portal**
  http://europa.eu.int/information_society/

- **Information Society and Media Directorate-General:**
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