

**THE OFFICES IN THE COMMUNITY -  
THE NEXT STEPS**

**Communication from  
Commissioner João de Deus PINHEIRO**

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# **THE OFFICES IN THE COMMUNITY - THE NEXT STEPS**

## **Summary**

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The Commission adopted on 30 June 1993 the principles of a new approach to information and communication (SEC(93) 916/9). This underlined the need for a further reinforcement of the Offices in the Community in line with the decision taken by the Commission in 1989.

It means that the role of the Offices has to be clearly strengthened as regards their functions as listeners, spokesmen, stimulators of the debate on Europe and coordinators of information and communication activities, all in close cooperation with the other Community Institutions, the Member States and regional authorities. Their information and communication role must therefore be further developed especially due to the stronger need for a decentralised approach to the media, to the decision-makers and to other opinion-formers.

The Commission is invited to confirm the strengthened role and functions of its Offices as set out in this communication.

## 1. THE CURRENT SITUATION

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- 1.1 In the context of the implementation of the Single European Act, the Commission adopted in 1989 the Communication "Europe 1992 - New Role of Commission Offices in the Member States" (SEC(89) 662/3), designed to heighten the Commission's presence and profile in the Member States. This was to be achieved by a significant shift in emphasis of the work undertaken by its Offices by transforming their traditional press and information role into a wider one of representing the Commission in the field.

A first progress report was adopted the following year (SEC(90) 1646), indicating the results which had been achieved. Three further years of experience have led to a generally positive assessment of the role played by the Offices. Their presence in political, social and economic circles has been clearly reinforced; they have stimulated the development of relays; and they have enlarged their two-way function through in-depth political reporting back to the Commission. Measures have also been taken by DG X to improve backup for the Offices, notably through the early warning system (ECCO), weekly teleconferences, Rapid Reply Service, etc. Overall, there has been an improvement in information flow.

The debate over the Treaty on European Union and the conclusions of the European Councils of Birmingham and Edinburgh led the Commission to adopt a new approach to information and communication policy. This document forms part of this new approach, the Offices' activities being a key element of the success of the new policy<sup>1</sup>.

- 1.2 In adopting its new approach, the Commission recognised that the European Union is faced by major challenges. It is therefore more important than ever for the Commission to be informed rapidly and accurately about public and political opinion in the Member States and to take account of this in the formulation of its policies and then in its information and communication activities. Its contribution to the decision-making process and political debate must be extended more widely and heard more clearly. It must take account of the variable public opinion in different Member States and regions and of their various expectations in respect of the European Union. And it must transmit in a user-friendly way a message whose content is clear and frank. This has not always been the case, particularly as regards the information supplied about the Treaty on European Union.

The strategy outlined in this document does not imply a break with past practice but rather a qualitative evolution aimed at reinforcing the progress already achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> This document deals only with the Offices in the Community. Two separate communications will cover information in third countries and relays and networks.

## **2. THE TASKS OF THE OFFICES**

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The Offices can only fulfil their role as representatives of the Commission if they are well informed about the situation in Member States; can detect the emergence of new ideas; follow discussion on the evolution of the European Union and supply the Commission rapidly with such information as is relevant for its reflections and policy proposals.

There are four essential aspects to the role of the Offices and these will be examined in turn.

### **2.1 The listening function**

Through their access not only to the principal actors in the areas concerned but also to organisations and associations which reflect the ordinary citizen's point of view, Offices will improve and extend their listening or monitoring function so that the Commission may be better informed about:-

- (i) positions taken by key opinions and decision-makers
- (ii) editorial developments and reporting in the media
- (iii) debates in national parliaments, and
- (iv) trends in public opinion and reaction to the activities of the Commission and more generally to the policies of the European Union.

The key requirement of effective listening and reporting is speed combined with a proper sifting of the relative importance of the information available. Effective feedback depends also on anticipation. Offices will therefore:-

- strengthen their political reporting;
- regularly update their forward calendars of major events;
- warn the Commission of probable developments.

These activities will involve close cooperation with central services, in particular the relevant units in DG X.

### **2.2 The communicating function**

The Offices have a vital role to play in cooperation with the Commission's Spokesman in order to ensure that the Commission's position is expressed clearly and quickly in the Member States. This implies both a pro-active role through briefings, press conferences and press releases, and a systematic re-active capacity for the correction of false, inaccurate and misleading information. The recently instituted "Rapid Reply Service" in DG X will provide much of the raw material for this.

The accredited press corps in Brussels, served directly by the Spokesman's Service, provides much of the media coverage of EC current affairs. However, many home-based journalists cover national debates about Europe, and follow the repercussions of Community decisions in the Member States; it is also necessary to take account of the fact that the majority of specialised media are located in the Member States. Accordingly, an increasing amount of

coverage of Community affairs is undertaken at national or regional level. This is the area in which the Offices have a particularly important role to play.

The 12 national Offices are on the point of being permanently linked with the Commission by TV satellite. Satellite conferences will enable Commissioners, the Spokesman's Service and others in Brussels to address journalists and others on current topics and to participate in various forums in one or more Member States at short notice and low cost. This facility will be an important instrument in the promotion of openness and in combatting popular myths about the Community.

These tasks can only be assumed efficiently if Offices are briefed every day and to this effect they can now listen to the morning briefing of the Spokesman via teleconference link. At the same time, it is important that Offices ensure that they are available to the media at all times.

### **2.3 Stimulation of the debate on Europe**

There is a growing need to stimulate public debate about Europe, in order to increase awareness of the main issues and to stimulate participation and reflexion. Given their position in the "front line", the Offices are ideally placed to encourage such debate for example through organising or participating in public hearings, workshops and other conferences. Active participation at the appropriate level from the centre is also necessary to ensure the success of such initiatives. The purpose of such activity is not only to present the Commission's viewpoint, but also to promote a genuine trans-frontier debate about Europe.

An example of the kind of initiative to be developed is a national version of "Carrefours" organised with the Forward Studies Unit in different priority sectors in order to promote an open debate among opinion-leaders.

### **2.4 The coordination function**

As the local representative of the Commission, the Offices must have systematic links with all Directorates-General and Services so that they receive essential and up-to-date input for the fulfilment of their tasks, and to enable Directorates-General to benefit from appropriate feedback. Whilst certain Directorates-General already organise specific activities with the Offices, a greater collective effort of cooperation and information is needed both by Directorates-General and Services and at the level of the Cabinets themselves.

All Directorates-General and Services must inform Offices of events, visits and contacts which they intend to undertake in Member States and can involve them in the preparation, execution and follow-up of visits by Commissioners and key senior officials to the Member States. It is therefore desirable to associate the Offices as much as possible with the organisation of visits in order to benefit from their experience in the field. They can therefore be included in official Commission delegations visiting Member States or attending European Council meetings. At the same time, it is extremely useful for Offices to be involved in politically important visits to the Commission by national Heads of State and Governments, Ministers, parliamentary representations and other high level delegations.

The meetings of representatives of the Offices organised 8 times a year by DG X provide a good opportunity for briefings by speakers from other Directorates-General and Services to improve information flows and coordination in this respect. They also enable Offices to exchange ideas about specific projects and explore avenues of cooperation.

The Offices also perform certain administrative tasks for other Services. They have for many years assisted DG VIII in respect of the tendering procedures for the European Development Fund and DG IX for the organisation of Commission recruitment competitions. They also provide members of the public with forms to initiate complaint procedures. This aspect of their work will tend to increase, particularly in the light of questions relating to openness and access to Commission documents as the Offices are obviously the easiest point of contact for many citizens. The evolution of the Offices' role in this respect must be examined in the light of future experience, but it is difficult to supply these services if the Directorates-General with policy responsibility for the areas concerned do not provide the necessary resources.

In addition, the translation Service and DG XVI have seconded staff to certain Offices. DGs must be encouraged to second staff for particular purposes on a temporary basis when the need arises, it being understood that staff seconded in such circumstances remain operationally and administratively attached to the seconding service whilst under the authority of the Head of Office. DG X will examine with each DG and Service the possibilities that may exist in this respect.

### **3. ORGANISING FOR THE FUTURE**

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Section 2 refers essentially to the functions of the Offices as the Commission's representative in the Member States. They still however continue to have an important rôle to play as suppliers of information to the public. Offices are frequently the first point of contact in this respect. They must therefore reinforce and refine their activities and the way in which their work is organised in the information and communication field. This requires not only innovation and the adaptation of existing instruments and programmes, but equally the setting of new priorities and activities. Offices will therefore prepare an annual work programme to be agreed and monitored within DG X and will periodically evaluate the impact of their activities. In line with the decisions of the European Councils of Birmingham and Edinburgh in 1992, these programmes should be carried out wherever possible in cooperation with the Member States themselves and with the European Parliament and other EC institutions, to ensure that the Community's message is more coherent.

Improved organisation and planning does not however mean uniformity of approach - information activities must take account of culture and political priorities of each Member State. The national and regional Offices are best placed to judge these to ensure that the Community is brought closer to its citizens. The following should be regarded as priorities.

#### **3.1 Working with Member States and Regional Authorities**

As already mentioned, the European Council has recognised the need for Member States to play a rôle in the provision of information about the Community. This is entirely in line with the principle of subsidiarity. It also recognises that the Commission cannot, for practical

reasons, accomplish this task alone. Whilst the Commission in Brussels must promote this overall collaboration with Member States in the information area, the Offices will be closely involved in initiating and implementing many of the specific projects, in collaboration with the appropriate national and regional authorities.

This cooperation can take several forms depending upon the structures and needs of the various Member States and other partners. It can involve, for instance, the encouragement and support for national and regional authorities to organise their own information network on Community affairs on general as well as specific questions; the promotion of educational and training schemes for the benefit of civil servants at national, regional and local level; and assistance towards government information centres such as the scheme currently under discussion in Denmark.

Two specific major projects which have come to fruition are the "Sources d'Europe" in France and the ANIDE venture in Italy. These centres provide Community information and documentation services to the general public and are equipped with computer terminals to more specialised data bases. The centre in Paris also has exhibition and conference facilities.

### **3.2 Working with other European Community Institutions**

The Commission's decision of 30 June 1993 and the Oostlander report adopted by the European Parliament underline the need for increased cooperation in the information field between the Commission and the European Parliament in order to present a more coherent picture of Europe to the citizen while maintaining the distinction between the roles of the two Institutions.

It was agreed in March 1993 between the European Parliament and the Commission that joint or coordinated activities should be carried out and the Offices of the two Institutions have put in place various joint operations.

These will include visits to Strasbourg and Brussels, publications, support to the education sector, cooperation in the management of relays and conferences on European themes. The two Institutions will keep under constant review the possibilities for creating common facilities such as joint video- and media-theques, joint user-friendly public databases, etc. An annual action plan will be established by the two Offices in each capital and discussed by DG X and DG III of the European Parliament.

It is important to establish a more systematic framework in the future for extending existing cooperation with the Economic and Social Committee, the Court of Justice, the European Investment Bank, the Court of Auditors, the prospective Committee of Regions and other EC bodies.

### **3.3 Educational partners**

Educational partners hold the primary key to the shaping of Europe's future. Among these is the teaching profession, from primary to tertiary education, including vocational training and extramural studies in a wide range of subjects. These partners demand therefore an ever growing supply of practical information material, including material on the Community.

On the one hand, the Offices will ensure a well-targeted use of those actions originating in the Commission itself, and on the other they will cooperate more closely in projects of the Member States.

The Offices should encourage the preparation, production and dissemination of educational material about Europe through competitions, prizes and other forms of financial support for new educational projects, especially when these involve several Member States. Offices are well placed to advise on the most appropriate projects and partners, which may include the national authorities and other EC Institutions, the private sector, etc.

### **3.4 The audiovisual media in the Member States**

The audiovisual media are increasingly important as information sources for the citizen and the role of the Offices in servicing television and radio is therefore vital.

The audiovisual media, including regional and local stations, will be encouraged to use the Offices as one of their principal sources of information, and Heads of Office will ensure an active profile for the Commission through interviews and participation in radio and TV programmes wherever possible. Offices should also have recourse to a wide range of personalities who can act as spokespersons. Privileged, rapid access to journalists (for example, via a dedicated telephone link) and facilities such as teletext and TV-spots where available will be developed further.

Every national Office has recruited an audiovisual expert to provide specialised assistance in this area.

### **3.5 The role of Offices in relation to relays**

In the context of the Offices' active presence in the regions, it is essential that they assume a significant role in relation to the network of relays in each Member State.

This means that, in liaison with the DG X "Relays and Networks" unit, and with other interested DGs and Services, the Offices will be actively involved in the selection of new relays, in the reorganisation and modernisation of existing relays, in the coordination of all networks and in the training of relay staff. Responsibility for the day-to-day back-up of relays and networks remains, of course, with the different Directorates-General concerned, but active cooperation between the Directorates-General and the Offices is required.

## **4. MANAGEMENT OF THE OFFICES**

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- 4.1 The upgrading of Offices and corresponding decentralisation of information activities "close to the European citizens" call for new management and a substantial increase in capacity. Responsibility for some activities, for example in the field of general public documentation, will be progressively transferred to relays operating under the Offices' supervision in order to bring the Community closer to the citizen and to enable the Offices to concentrate their energies on the tasks outlined above.

- 4.2 As regards the question of human and budgetary resources DG X will ensure that within the credits allocated to information activities under the normal budgetary procedure, greater emphasis is placed on the needs of the Offices.

It is also important that special attention be given to the Offices' requirements for outside expertise when the Commission makes its annual allocation of credits for external assistance and consultancy contracts.

- 4.3 As regards the staffing of the Offices, it is necessary to assure a strict functioning of the rotation system. In order to achieve this, the mobility of A and B grade staff assigned to the Offices will be actively pursued on the basis of a pluri-annual programme but it must be borne in mind that at present, insufficient incentives combined with a lack of freedom of choice can mean that it is not always possible to attract the most highly-qualified staff to postings in the Offices in the Community.

In addition, a greater effort is necessary on the part of other DGs and Services to assist DG X in its task of reassigning officials returning from postings to an Office. A posting in an Office is beneficial in terms of the experience acquired as well as being a considerable challenge. It is in the interests of the Commission that officials who return can occupy a post which reflects this experience. It is therefore important to effectively implement the arrangements decided by the Commission when it adopted the document on the new role of the Offices in 1989. This means that irrespective of an official's right to return to his original DG, Directorates-General and Services must give priority, when filling vacant posts, to officials who are placed on the rotation list. Within the framework of the rotation procedures, DG IX will ensure that these provisions are respected.

In the same way, the "Comité Consultatif des Nominations" should also pay special attention to applications for middle management posts by officials working in the Offices.

## 5. CONCLUSION

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The Commission is asked to approve the orientations set out in the present Communication, and to instruct all Directorates-General and Services to implement the various measures contained in it.