



The information society

The Commission will soon be adopting a communication on interaction between developments in the field of the information society and the goal of economic and social cohesion which the Union has set itself. Its main conclusions are given below.

Recent progress in communication and information technologies (CITs) has reduced the effects of distance, bringing together industries traditionally not so closely linked (telecommunications, information technology and the media) and encouraging the creation of new economic activities. However, access to CITs in the Community does not take place on a level footing. To remedy this situation, the Commission makes various proposals for stimulating demand and investment in the field of CITs and for appropriate regulations in this sector.

The Member States and the regions are called upon to launch a series of initiatives which will help provide economic, social and institutional actors with appropriate tools and know-how with which to make the best use of information society developments and avoid the inherent dangers. All these actors should be involved in strategy discussions with a view to determining what applications and services linked to CITs can best meet demand. Partnerships with the public sector will help to mobilize the private sector and ensure that projects are both in line with commercial requirements and based on long-term viability.

With a view to completing or upgrading telecoms networks, the Commission recommends concentrating further expenditure on projects which will strengthen cohesion. The Commission would also like to see the Member States starting a wide-ranging debate on the

problems of universal service provision and on legislative adjustments which might be made in this area, making sure of the active and direct participation of all the actors concerned, in particular in the less-favoured regions.

The Commission for its part intends to step up the internal consistency of its activities in the field of CITs, in particular under the Fifth Framework Programme for research and technology development. The results of the discussions within the Member States will be fully integrated into its legislative proposals.

Finally, the Commission expresses its firm will to use the Structural Funds as a way of providing on-going support for the efforts by the Member States in this field, as it has in the past despite the very modest budgets allocated to this type of activity. In this connection it is worth recalling the STAR and TELEMATIQUE Initiatives, and more recently the Interregional Initiative for the Information Society (IRISI).

Within the same general context, the Commission is organizing a conference at the end of January 1997 on how to take the issues surrounding the information society into proper account in the Community's structural policies, and it will be carrying out an assessment of the impact of programmes under the Structural Funds in this field. The new guidelines for Objective 1 will stress the importance of CITs in terms of the competitiveness of the least well-off regions. The Commission will also be setting up an advisory group, with an initial term of two years, which will be asked in particular to monitor demand in the eligible regions.

The complete text of the communication can be obtained on request from DG XVI/F/2, fax +32-2-230.49.15).

New programmes

Between 1 November and 9 December, the Commission approved Community funding for 11 new Community Initiative programmes. To obtain information sheets on these programmes, contact Mr L. Nigri, DG XVI/F/2, fax:

+32-2-296.60.03) or consult the "ERDF programmes" pages at the Internet site of DG XVI (electronic address: <http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg16/dg16home.htm>).

	Country / region / area concerned	Community Initiative	Total public investment (ECU million)	Contribution of the Structural Funds (ECU million)
D	Sachsen-Anhalt (Halle)	Urban	5.2	2.7
	Saarland (Saarbrücken)	Urban	20.5	8.0
I	Italia	Konver	97.7	46.0
UK	West Midlands (Birmingham)	Urban	16.0	8.0
	East London (Hackney and Towers Hamlets)	Urban	16.4	8.0
	Wales (Swansea Townhill)	Urban	11.5	5.6
	London (Park Royal)	Urban	15.3	7.7
SF	Suomi Finland	SMEs	18.7	11.1
S	Sydsverige (Malmö)	Urban	9.9	5.0
B/F	West Vlaanderen / Nord-Pas-de-Calais	Interreg II	37.7	18.0
UK/F	Kent / Nord-Pas-de-Calais	Interreg II	90.6	45.1

Informal council of ministers

The progress of economic and social cohesion within the Union and the impact of the Structural Funds on employment were the two topics which dominated the informal gathering of ministers responsible for regional policy and planning held in Ballyconnell (Ireland) on 14 and 15 November.

On cohesion, the discussion was based around the first Report on Economic and Social Cohesion adopted by the Commission on 6 November (see Inforegio News No 34), as well as experience with implementing the Structural Funds as reported by the Spanish, Portuguese, German and French delegations. Among the factors that could help increase the effectiveness and transparency of the Community's structural policies, the ministers mentioned:

- the need to strengthen the concentration of financial resources on certain regions and certain goals, determined on the basis of Community criteria;
- the need to simplify the procedures relating to the Structural Funds and to improve the monitoring, assessment and inspection of the use of Structural Fund resources;
- the importance of establishing a very broad-based partnership for implementing structural policies, involving the regional and local authorities as much as possible.

On employment, Mrs Wulf-Mathies, the Commissioner responsible for regional policy, pointed out the scope within the existing framework of the structural policies for supporting the creation of more lasting jobs:

- adjustment of the programmes under Objectives 1 and 6 on the basis of results already achieved;
- priority for employment when negotiating programmes under Objective 2 for 1997-99;
- strengthening Community support for local development initiatives.

The Commissioner also gave more detail at Ballyconnell on the Commission's proposals for 'territorial employment pacts'. It will be recalled that the initiative for these pacts formed part of the Community strategy for employment adopted at the European Council in Essen and confirmed in Madrid and Dublin. The aim is to mobilize all political, economic and social partners within a given geographical area in support of a strategy agreed on at regional or local level. In concrete terms, about sixty employment pacts selected by the Member States are to be carried out with the aid of the Structural Funds, inspired by examples of partnerships of this type which already exist in the regions.

Directoria event

The next Directoria event will take place in Strasbourg from 24 to 26 February next year. These meetings are open to all chief executives and senior officials of regional and local authorities in the Union and are designed to help them find partners and develop joint projects. The next event will be devoted more particularly to pilot projects as part of inter-

regional cooperation inside the Community (Recite II) and outside the Community (Ouverture II) financed by the European Regional Development Fund. For information and registration: fax +352 22 98 04 (electronic address: <http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg16/art10/direhome.htm>).



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