VIENNA "E- INCLUSION" MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE CONCLUSIONS

BY

THE PRESIDENCY OF THE
COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

2nd December 2008

The Ministers of EU Member States and other European countries met on 30 November 2008, on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference on e-Inclusion held in Vienna, under the Presidency of Mr Besson, French Secretary of State responsible for Forward Planning, Assessment of Public Policies and Development of the Digital Economy, welcomed by Mr Buchinger, Austrian Minister for Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, and in the presence of Mr Colasanti, Director General for Information Society & Media, European Commission.

The Vienna Conference also gathered more than a thousand experts and European and international actors in the field of e-Inclusion. This Conference followed the Ministerial Meetings in Riga in 2006 and in Lisbon in 2007, and concluded the European initiative "*E-inclusion: be part of it!*" launched by the European Commission at the end of 2007.

On this occasion, the Presidency of the European Union:

Recalls that

• Access to and effective use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has become an essential condition to ensure citizens' participation in social and democratic life. "*e-Inclusion*" of citizens is necessary both for the strengthening of social cohesion and for the competitiveness of our societies.

• Important progress has been made since the 2006 Riga Conference on an inclusive information society, in particular regarding the deployment of high-speed Internet connections, increase in the use of the Internet and digital competences.

• Many regions and European countries, as well as civil society actors and companies have put in place e-Inclusion related initiatives, which contributed to this progress.

• The efforts of the European Commission in this direction are particularly welcomed, especially:

- the European initiative "E-inclusion: be part of it! " launched at the end of 2007 in the framework of the i2010 strategy, with the Vienna Conference being part of this initiative
- the proposal for support to the Ambient Assisted Living European programme for research on technologies in the field independent living of elderly people - the "new European social agenda" and in particular the proposal for a Directive on equal treatment
- the documents of Commission services on the ICT and social agenda, digital skills digital literacy), and technologies for life-long-learning
- the forthcoming Communication " Towards and Accessible Information Society")
– the Recommendation on social inclusion of the people excluded from the labour market. The engagement of France in this area must be equally underlined namely the recent adoption of the "Development plan for the Digital Economy – Digital France 2012". This plan aims to ensure universal access to high speed Internet at a reasonable price for all citizens as of 1 January 2010. Measures aimed at improving accessibility of digital services for elderly and vulnerable people have also been put in place.

• However, much remains to be done; indeed almost half of the European population does not use the Internet regularly and do not have sufficient competences to do so. In particular, elderly people, those who have a low education or modest income level and unemployed persons lag behind in the use of ICT.

Underlines that:

• Measures to improve digital inclusion constitute an investment in the future and have to be at the center of public policies addressing the information society. Actions have to contain measures related to social inclusion, employment, education, administrative reform, territorial cohesion and health. Such measures have to be taken at international and European level as well as at local level.

• A strong political commitment, targeted to vulnerable social groups, is necessary in order to improve digital inclusion. The objectives of the Ministerial Declaration adopted at the

Conference on an Inclusive Information Society, held in Riga in June 2006, remain valid until their 2010 deadline. Efforts have to be agreed upon in particular regarding the accessibility of ICT ("e-accessibility") and acquisition of digital competences ("digital literacy"), especially for the elderly. Moreover, the potential of ICT must be better exploited so as to improve the quality, effectiveness and accessibility of public and social services. On the geographical digital divide

• Broadband is becoming an "essential commodity" like water or electricity. It is today anindispensable service for the effective participation in the global trade, economy, education, culture, politics and society. As new broadband services are developed and new and more capable infrastructures are made available old gaps may get entrenched and new gaps may arise between those who have access and can successfully exploit it and those who do not have access or lack the ability to exploit it. The Commission and the Member States are called upon to put in place measures aimed at ensuring an adequate participation to the information society, by enabling citizens to access and exploit ICT irrespective of location or socio-economic background, in particular in convergence regions and remote and rural areas of the European Union.

On digital accessibility

• It is necessary to agree on efforts to improve the accessibility of ICT in general and websites in particular, since progress remains insufficient. These efforts will facilitate the access and use of on-line information and services by elderly persons and people with disabilities or those with a low level of education or insufficient digital competences. They will also facilitate the use of technologies by the general population.

• To this end, public authorities are encouraged to ensure the application of the most recent European and international specifications on the accessibility of websites, and to put in place accompanying strategies in accordance with the forthcoming European Commission Communication "Towards an accessible information society". The European Commission is invited to continue work on a common implementation of the mentioned specifications and strategies for the accessibility of websites in Europe in order to limit the risks of lack of action and fragmentation of approaches. Providers of online services should also aim to ensure a good level of accessibility of their services on all platforms, fixed and mobiles.

• It is important to improve the accessibility and user-friendliness of technologies and on-line services such as: the websites, personal computers, fixed telephones and mobiles, television, as well as content and services that can be accessed by means of these technologies. To this end, it is appropriate to mobilise various instruments at the disposal of public authorities as well as the

economic and social actors: the development and application of adapted technical standards, legislation, including the possibilities resulting from EU legislation; financial support for research and the deployment of digital accessibility solutions and assistive technologies; dialogue between the main actors concerned: public authorities, users' associations and companies.

• Concerning Community legislation, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union are encouraged to adopt new provisions on e-accessibility, in particular in the framework of the legislative proposals of the European Commission on electronic communications, and equal rights. Moreover, the provision on persons with disabilities in the recently adopted audio-visual services Directive should be fully exploited.

• Public procurement and notably the aspects related to the accessibility of ICT constitute a particularly powerful instrument and will have to be fully exploited. The European standardisation bodies are encouraged to continue their work in this area, in accordance with the mandate which was given to them by the European Commission; in this context the European Commission will have to continue the dialogue at international and European level in order to prepare the ground for the application of these standards On digital competences

• Digital competences have become an essential element in the education of individuals, and this in a context of life-long-learning. The education systems must integrate ICT in pupils' courses, teachers' training and teaching methods.

• It is equally important that digital competences are promoted through vocational and continuous training as well as through measures in support of the elderly. Social intermediaries who are in regular contact with the target groups have an essential role to play in this regard, and have to be trained and supported by the public authorities. Community centers are an important instrument in the work of social intermediaries of the target groups, in particular those suffering from poverty, social isolation or who otherwise are at risk of social exclusion.

• Employers, both public and private, also must contribute to ICT training of their employees, and should be encouraged in this sense, including possibly through taxation incentives.

• Beyond large scale programmes stimulating access and basic skills, the new generation of digital literacy programmes should prevent the emergence of new digital divides in access to and use of information by increasing trust and confidence in the use of technology and in new forms of participation through social networks. On inclusive e-administration, public and social services

• Development of an accessible electronic administration is a priority as well. ICTs allow for an integrated and accessible vision of public service, adapted to the needs of users throughout their personal and professional life. The accessibility of all public websites by 2010 must be encouraged while ensuring that the documents available can be used by persons with disabilities in suitable formats.

• It is important that the potential of ICT is better exploited in the domains of public and social services, in particular under the programmes for employment, health services and social assistance.

• It is necessary to improve the training of civil servants, and other persons responsible for social services, to use the ICT in their work and to give them the means to use ICT in an effective way. At the same time, public and social services have to be organised in such a way that the use of ICT does not create more exclusion for certain categories of users. It is also necessary to improve the access to and quality of services for citizens. This requires that services are adapted to the needs and characteristics of their users. The provision of services can be facilitated if necessary by intermediaries that are close to the target users, at home or in public spaces.

• More specifically, access to emergency services has to be made accessible to all persons, including elderly persons or those with disabilities. Generally, the potential of ICT has to be better exploited in order to improve life and social participation of elderly people, including those in a situation of dependence.

Concludes that:

• In a difficult economic context, it is more than ever necessary to support vulnerable people in our society, as stressed by the recent European Commission Communication *"From financial crisis to recovery: a European framework for action."*

• ICTs constitute an essential tool to achieve this objective. Joint action in the area of e-inclusion can at the same time contribute to creating new jobs and to improving their quality, for example in the sector of care for elderly and depending persons, including putting in place activities for unemployed people.

• Finally, better digital inclusion will contribute to strengthening the main asset of Europe: its human capital.