

MINISTERIAL DECLARATION

APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY ON

11 June 2006, Riga, Latvia

Meeting in Riga on the occasion of the Ministerial Conference “ICT for an inclusive society” of the Austrian Presidency of the European Council and of the European Commission and hosted by the government of Latvia, Ministers of European Union (EU) Member States, accession and candidate countries, European Free Trade Area (EFTA) countries and other countries, responsible for eInclusion policy, under the chairmanship of Minister Ursula Haubner, representing the Austrian Presidency and in the presence of European Commissioner for Information Society and Media Mrs Viviane Reding

RECOGNISE THAT:

1. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are a powerful driver of growth and employment. A quarter of EU GDP growth and around 50% of productivity growth are due to ICT. ICT services, skills, media and content, and their use in other industry sectors, are a growing part of the economy and society. ICT is thus strongly instrumental to achieving the Lisbon strategy goals.
2. ICT contributes to improving the quality of everyday life and social participation of Europeans, facilitating access to information, media, content and services, to enhanced and more flexible job opportunities, and to fight against discrimination. Improving ICT access for people with disabilities and elderly is particularly important.
3. Many Europeans still reap few or no benefits from ICT and there are resilient gaps in ICT use. For instance, 57% of individuals living in the EU did not regularly use the Internet in 2005; only 10% of persons over 65 used Internet, against 68% of those aged 16-24; only 24% of persons with low education used the Internet, against 73% of those with high education; only 32% of unemployed persons used the Internet against 54% of employed persons. Only 3% of public web sites surveyed comply with the minimum web accessibility standards and guidelines, hindering access to web content and services for people with disabilities who comprise some 15% of the EU population.¹
4. “eInclusion” means both inclusive ICT and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives. It focuses on participation of all individuals and communities in all aspects of the information society. eInclusion policy, therefore, aims at reducing gaps in ICT usage and promoting the use of ICT to overcome exclusion, and improve economic performance, employment opportunities, quality of life, social participation and cohesion.

¹ Data on internet use are sourced from *i2010 – First Annual Report on the European Information Society*, COM(2006)0215, and on web accessibility from the study for the 2005 UK Presidency of the EU “eAccessibility of public sector services in the EU”



5. *i2010 - a European information society for growth and employment* - announces a European initiative on eInclusion for 2008. The 2006 Riga Ministerial Conference on ICT for an inclusive society provides strategic guidance and is a major step towards this initiative. Future work in eInclusion shall build on national, regional and local initiatives, and link into European policies already in place. All relevant authorities, industries, users and civil society representatives are invited to jointly contribute.
6. In line with i2010, eInclusion policy addresses issues in the fields of active ageing, geographical digital divide, accessibility, digital literacy and competences, cultural diversity and inclusive eGovernment.
7. Particular attention must be paid to further improve user motivation towards ICT use, as well as trust and confidence through better security and privacy protection. Furthermore, greater gender balance in the information society remains a key objective.
8. To convincingly address eInclusion, the differences in Internet usage between current average use by the EU population and use by older people, people with disabilities, women, lower education groups, unemployed and “less-developed” regions should be reduced to a half, from 2005 to 2010.

AGREE TO FOCUS ON THE FOLLOWING PRIORITIES AND COMMIT TO THE INDICATED POLICY GOALS:

Address the needs of older workers and elderly people by

9. Exploiting the full potential of the internal market of ICT services and products for the elderly, amongst others by addressing demand fragmentation by promoting interoperability through standards and common specifications where appropriate. Barriers to innovative ICT solutions for social security and health reimbursement schemes need to be addressed, particularly at the national level.
10. Improving the employability, working conditions and work-life balance of older workers to improve productivity by supporting innovative ICT solutions which can be easily used everywhere including at home, and encouraging the provision of training from the public, private sectors and from civil society, making special efforts on ICT skills for older people.
11. Enhancing active participation in the society and economy and self-expression, through innovative ICT-enabled access to goods and services, and relevant content, to facilitate interactions with public and private entities, entertainment, and social contacts.
12. Realising increased quality of life, autonomy and safety, while respecting privacy and ethical requirements. This can be done through independent living initiatives, the promotion of assistive technologies, and ICT-enabled services for integrated social and healthcare, including personal emergency and location-based services. The ambient assisted living initiative of the 7th Framework Programme is an important initiative in this respect.



Reduce geographical digital divides by

13. Facilitating affordable access to ICT networks and terminal equipment, contents and services everywhere and particularly in remote and rural areas and regions lagging behind, including small settlements, for instance by promoting new technologies, cooperation between the public and private sector and by supporting networking, benchmarking and exchange of experiences between countries and regions.
14. Reducing significantly the disparities in internet access between all regions, increasing the availability of broadband in under-served locations, aiming for broadband coverage to reach at least 90% of the EU population by 2010. To this effect, Structural Funds and the Rural Development Fund shall be used, and Public Internet Access Points shall be supported where appropriate. National i2010 broadband strategies shall be updated to provide additional guidance and targets regarding coverage and connectivity in public administrations, schools, health centres and other key locations.

Enhance eAccessibility and usability by

15. Fully implementing the eAccessibility provisions in EU legislation on electronic communications and terminal equipment and using all other instruments available, from voluntary industry commitments to new legal provisions at EU and national level where appropriate. The effectiveness of these various instruments needs to be regularly assessed.
16. Particularly important in this context is to ensure that the needs of users with disabilities are fully taken into account in the review of the electronic communications framework presently taking place, reinforcing current legal provisions as appropriate where benefits for users with disabilities appear to be limited so far, including setting up a group with Member States representatives to address needs for legislative action on eAccessibility.
17. Exploring by 2007 European eAccessibility standards and common approaches in public procurement for ICT products and services, for all public administrations above the relevant EU financial thresholds, with a view to making these mandatory by 2010.
18. Fostering the application of common requirements and standards, European or global, for accessible and usable ICT hardware, software and services, to be supported by appropriate user involvement, and means of demonstrating conformance, e.g. labelling. In so doing, innovation, interoperability and open architectures of accessible convergent communications shall be encouraged, while promoting European solutions on the international scene including in standardisation processes.
19. Facilitating accessibility and usability of ICT products and services for all, with a special focus on people with disabilities, such that this will benefit everyone. This should be achieved by accessible digital content on all platforms, interoperable assistive technologies, and mainstreaming inclusive design and design for all in the development of ICT products and services. Research, professional training, centres and networks of excellence, user involvement, labelling, conformity assessment, and other means are key. Links between mainstream ICT industry and the assistive technologies sector should be facilitated, and a European curriculum on design for all should be promoted.



Improve digital literacy and competences

20. Countries will put in place, by 2008, digital literacy and competence actions, in particular through formal or informal education systems, building on existing initiatives. These actions will be tailored to the needs of groups at risk of exclusion, because of their social circumstances or their capacities and special needs, notably the unemployed, immigrants, people with low education levels, people with disabilities, and elderly, as well as marginalised young people, contributing to their employability and working conditions. The current gaps of digital literacy and competence between these groups and the average population should be halved by 2010. Progress on this target should be measured on the basis of available indicators and further work in the context of i2010.
21. Digital literacy and competences actions will be undertaken, where appropriate, through partnerships with the private sector and in conjunction with initiatives on basic education and media literacy in the areas of life-long-learning, e-skills, and digital user rights. Regular upgrading and refreshing of ICT competences will be facilitated so that the workforce can efficiently cope with technical and economic developments.
22. These actions will be supported by appropriate qualification schemes, building on work by industry and academics, attesting to the levels of digital literacy and competence achieved, promoting their trans-national recognition in conformity with the European Commission orientations on Key Competences for Life Long Learning, building on work done by industry as appropriate.

Promote cultural diversity in relation to inclusion by

23. Fostering pluralism, cultural identity and linguistic diversity in the digital space. Promoting digitisation, the creation of accessible digital content, and wide and cross-national access to digital information and cultural heritage in support of European integration. Fostering multilingual and local content throughout Europe, as well as European values of freedom, tolerance, equality, solidarity and democracy. ICT innovation and good practice exchanges at all levels are important means to achieve this.
24. Improving the possibilities for economic and social participation and integration, creativity and entrepreneurship of immigrants and minorities by stimulating their participation in the information society. Particular efforts shall be made to improve the employability and productivity of minorities. Tailored ICT training and support actions can be important in this context.

Promote inclusive eGovernment by

25. Promoting and ensuring accessibility of all public web sites by 2010, through compliance with the relevant W3C common web accessibility standards and guidelines. Calling upon the private sector to do likewise, to consider accessibility principles from the outset of the web development process, and to develop the appropriate authoring tools and software.
26. Designing and delivering key services and public service policies in a user-centric and inclusive way, using channels, incentives and intermediaries that maximise benefits and convenience for all so that no one is left behind. Promoting user rights and obligations towards public administrations and regarding participation in democratic processes.



27. Disseminating user-centric security concepts to increase awareness of digital network and information security. In so doing, harness good practices, including from the private sector and civil society.
28. Ensuring that electronic documents are available in such a way that they can be used by people with disabilities in appropriate and, where possible, EU-wide recognised formats.
29. Working together with the Commission to implement inclusive eGovernment, in line with the i2010 eGovernment Action Plan and the related Council Conclusions.

Mobilise appropriate instruments by

30. Ensuring that national eInclusion strategies are in place in time to contribute to the 2008 European eInclusion Initiative, building upon existing national, regional and local initiatives, and in line with this Declaration.
31. Using appropriate mechanisms, in particular EU funds, demonstration and deployment projects, public procurement, research, public-private partnerships, stakeholder involvement, inter-governmental cooperation, benchmarking, and exchange of good practice, for implementation of this Declaration and evaluation of its impact. The positive impact of eInclusion actions will require seeking synergies with related policy areas at all levels.

INVITE THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO:

32. Rapidly come forward in 2006 with a Communication on ICT and ageing, addressing ICT solutions for active ageing and independent living.
33. Reinforce research and development through the 7th Framework Programme, and large-scale innovative demonstration and deployment pilots through the Competitiveness and Innovation Programme to stimulate the emergence of lead markets as called for by the Aho report, and of which the significance has been underlined by the 2006 Spring European Council.
34. Reassess the situation of eAccessibility in the EU in 2007, the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All, exploring the need for further exploiting available instruments, including EU legislation in line with better regulation principles, and for progress in areas such as public procurement. In particular, the review of the electronic communications framework should seek to reinforce the rights for users with disabilities. Moreover, in its 2007 consultation on the future of the universal service, the Commission should address the requirements of users with special social needs, due to disability or other reasons, considering users with disabilities as consumers with equal rights.
35. Analyse how eInclusion policy contributes to the wider social inclusion agenda. In this context, work together with EU Member States and other countries to ensure that the open method of co-ordination on social protection and inclusion fully takes into account the contribution of eInclusion actions.



36. Support evidence gathering, networking at all levels including regional and local, indicators, benchmarking and exchange of good practices as well as guidance from lessons learned from Europe and beyond. Mobilize civil society and industry as main stakeholders and undertake co-ordination where necessary.
37. Come forward in 2007 with a coherent eInclusion approach within the i2010 framework, notably through the i2010 High Level Group and its sub-groups, towards the European eInclusion initiative in 2008 and in line with this Declaration. The Commission shall present a Communication on this subject with measurable targets where relevant.
38. Review the digital literacy measurements, policies and achievements in the European Union by 2008.
39. Stimulate international co-operation on eInclusion together with EU Member States, other countries, and international organisations and prepare for a global summit on eInclusion as part of the 2008 eInclusion Initiative and in line with the Lisbon Declaration on EU-Latin America and Caribbean co-operation on the information society, the World Summit on the Information Society, and EU-US dialogue on eAccessibility.

While eInclusion policy requires public intervention at many levels, the contribution of civil society, industry and all other stakeholders is essential and often driving. Therefore

MINISTERS INVITE OTHER AUTHORITIES, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND INDUSTRY TO:

40. Develop initiatives that respond to the challenges of this Declaration and to work together with the European Commission, EU Member States and other countries in implementing the goals of this Declaration.
41. In so doing, to pay particular attention to the needs of the elderly population, seeking to realise the potential for better quality of life and working environments, more accessible, efficient and high-quality services, private as well as public services, notably social, integrated healthcare and long term care services, thereby creating also new business opportunities.
42. Continue to develop innovative solutions to address the geographic digital divide in Europe and beyond, while respecting competition rules.
43. Seek voluntary and pro-active industry commitments on eAccessibility and usability, amongst others by associating users at the early stages of the technology development process, and mainstream inclusive design and design for all principles, as well as support research activity in this field.
44. Step up private sector initiatives and private-public partnerships, where appropriate and relevant to improve digital literacy and competences, by developing and implementing appropriate training schemes. In this context, recognition schemes and exchange of experiences can play an important role.



45. Encourage collaboration and self-help among groups at risk of social exclusion by promoting communities of interest. Associate intermediaries in the design and implementation of initiatives for eInclusion.
46. Contribute to the implementation of inclusive eGovernment and ICT-enabled public services by public authorities at all levels, promoting user rights and obligations towards public administrations, and stimulating their participation in all phases of democratic decision-making.

FINALLY, MINISTERS

Welcome the close cooperation of EU Member States and other countries with the European Commission towards the 2008 European Initiative on eInclusion and encourage the forthcoming Presidencies to undertake appropriate initiatives and continue actively supporting the Commission in developing the 2008 Initiative.

Agree that by implementing this Declaration, Europe creates the opportunity for global leadership in eInclusion.

