Address of Luis Magalhães, President of the Portuguese Knowledge Society Agency (UMIC), at the Closing Plenary Session of the e-Inclusion Ministerial Debate, Lisbon, 2-3 December

I address you as President of the public institute in Portugal responsible for Information Society policy coordination – the Knowledge Society Agency (UMIC) – which is also the main Portuguese entity involved in the organization of this meeting in partnership with the European Commission.

Internet, computers, mobile telephones, and other developments of Information and Communication Technologies as optical fibres and digital TV, **have deeply transformed the way people live – the way they learn, work, use their leisure time, and interact –**, in personal relationships as well as in organizations.

This transformation has a clear central importance for present and future economic opportunities and for the quality of life of the people.

Every time a powerful new enabling communication technology is introduced, the natural evolution, if the course of events would be left to itself, would be to increase inequalities – the most privileged naturally benefiting more than others. In such times, it is **critical to promote social public policies of inclusion with the same technology**.

When 10 years ago, in 1997, the Information Society public policies were initiated in Portugal, and Portugal trailed the first steps of the European policies in this area that were to be later reinforced in the Portuguese Presidency of 2000, it was clear that the main challenge would be to **embed the information society in community life**. The digital inclusion appeared as a clear priority since then.

The digital divide in Portugal is mainly linked to educational attainment. **Portugal has a position within the countries where the Internet is most used by people with higher or secondary education, respectively 87% and 80%, clearly above the European averages and in the group of Norwegian countries, The Netherlands, Luxemburg and United Kingdom. Much above than it could be expected on the basis of macroeconomic indicators**. But Portugal has a very particular situation in Europe regarding the population qualifications inherited from a long period when the people ignorance was politically intended – it was a strategy of ignorance to rule by unchallenged authority. **Only slightly more than a quarter of the adult population has secondary education nowadays**. The difficulties faced by adults who did not achieve secondary education when trying to use computers and the Internet are well known and easy to understand. The problem in Portugal is that this group is very large. These difficulties can only be overcome by easier interfaces than the computer, like mobile phones, digital TV, configurable and adaptive touch screens, and intelligent ambients, and also by proximity work at the community level with groups at risk of being left behind done with local entities and nongovernmental organizations of solidarity and development.

So, the digital inclusion policy priorities in Portugal are: (1) **education and training in and with Information and Communication Technologies**, (2) **dissemination of locations of free public access to computers and the Internet with the support of trained personnel, to which we call Internet Spaces**, and (3) **accessibility for people with disabilities**.

To be concrete, I mention part of what was and is being done:

- **More than 1,130 Internet Spaces were installed which now form the densest such network in Europe.**

  While I finish you will see projected images of Internet Spaces in several locations in Portugal.

  The set of Internet Spaces includes 111 Digital Inclusion Centres for immigrants and children, most of them in deprived neighbourhoods, and 209 in social solidarity

organizations. **The Internet Spaces Network is now a powerful instrument for digital inclusion.**

- **All basic and secondary schools were connected to the Internet from 1997 to 2001, and afterwards in 2005 they were all connected in broadband**. So, Portugal has been in the front line of connecting schools to the Internet, while at the same time assuring the presence of broadband even in the most remote areas in the country.

- **The introduction of the use of computers and the Internet in primary schools was supported on projects involving Higher Education institutions, through the direct and regular action of teams of specialists in education coming from the Higher Education institutions.** Hundreds of thousands of students and tens of thousands of teachers were involved in these activities.

- In the current year, the so called **e-School Programme** was initiated, allowing 10th grade students, basic and secondary school teachers, and adults being trained in the **New Opportunities Programme**, which is aimed at qualifying 1 million adults up to 2010, to **obtain lap top computers with broadband connections at a reduced cost for the user (an initial payment of 150 euros and a monthly fee of 15 euros). The objective is to reach more than half a million people**.

- **Portugal was the 1st European country and the 3rd in the world to approve, in 1997, legislation on public administration website accessibility requirements for people with disabilities**. Consequently, we have today one of the better situations in Europe, but it still is far from adequate. **In October of the current year, the Government decided to require that all websites of the Government itself and the Central Public Administration should comply up to the end of 2007 with the World Wide Web Consortium level A accessibility requirements, and in the case of transactional sites with the level AA within the following 3 months**. Currently, initiatives are also being pursued in the private sector to improve the accessibility of home banking and e-commerce websites.

Accessibility must be particularly underlined today, as it is the United Nations International Day of Disabled Persons.

As you probably know, the Competitiveness Council of a little more than a week ago agreed on a **joint research programme on *Ambient Assisted Living*** to be considered for the co-decision process of approval with the European Parliament. This area, which has a very high potential impact in inclusion, has received particular attention in Portugal, as it is planned to **create in Portugal the first Fraunhofer Institute outside Germany, precisely for working in Ambient Assisted Living.**

To finish, as responsible for the Portuguese agency more involved in the organization of this event, I would like to collectively thank all the people who strongly worked in the organization of this meeting, both from Portuguese organizations and from the Directorate-General of Information Society and Media of the European Commission. Please forgive me not to mention names.

As all of you are aware, the organization of this meeting required a lot of very difficult and continued work of many people with a very strong commitment.

I would like to thank them all for the well done work.