

OPEN DAYS 2006

Speech of Commissioner Danuta Hübner
Connecting regions for growth and jobs

ICT Seminar

Is your region connected to the information society?

11 October 2006, 16.00

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The success story of Open Days and Investors Café is a proof that it is both possible and useful to gather different stakeholders around the same table to facilitate exchange of views. And this is the format of today's meeting where the speakers represent a wide range of views regarding information society. Notably, we have a number of key executives from leading IT companies which decided to prepare this seminar jointly with DG REGIO. Therefore, I hope that our meeting will benefit those with the responsibility of defining innovative regional strategies for their regions, specifically in the field of information society.

I am not an ICT expert but it is clear to me that the dissemination of ICT across the Union's economy is a major lever for improving both the productivity levels and the competitiveness of regions, whilst encouraging the re-organisation of production methods and the emergence of new businesses. ICTs also generate positive side-effects in the economy through learning-by-doing, faster transfer of know-how and increased transparency. These features are at the heart of the synergy between the Commission's action plan 'Information Society

i2010 - A European Information Society for growth and employment' and the new regional policy for 2007-2013.

It can be said that information technologies - rather than being an one off growth impulse - revolutionize European economy and redefine its competitive advantages in a continuous way. This is also a growth driver which opens to the lagging regions an opportunity to accelerate the catching up process. Clearly, new regional policy which is one of the most important instruments for the realisation of the Union's growth and jobs agenda cannot not ignore this fact.

Therefore, my message to you today conveys two main issues. Firstly, I will speak of the role that regional authorities can play in producing innovative strategies for Information Society and in setting up ICT investment, and the challenges inherent to such an approach; secondly of the way by which regional policy can support ICT investment within regions that have different levels of development.

Regional authorities can make use of a wide range of instruments that regional policy provides, such as the partnership principle, which involves partners, including from private sector, in all stages of policy design and implementation. They have also in hand the programming approach and the use of the regional policy investment in order to implement successful strategies.

But, in spite of our endeavours to facilitate the introduction of new technologies, engineering innovation in the public sector is not an easy

task. Policy makers are often unaware of the latest technologies and commercial developments. The change can happen at a quicker pace when business people, experts and policymakers talk to and know about each other, creating the basis for co-operation. And this is a must for sound ICT investment.

The programming strategy used by regional policy is placing increasing emphasis on developing research and innovation activities. We recognize that they are not only important in generating wealth but in ensuring that a region has the capacity to anticipate and adapt to the continuous change which characterises today's world. They provide a window for opportunities, such as faster technological advances to regions. An "information society for all" is one of the major components of our growth strategy for improving knowledge and innovation that will make our regions more attractive places in which to invest and work.

Innovating regions have defined strategies that integrate information society by developing network infrastructures, by promoting services to citizens and business, by supporting IT education, training, use of broadband applications and by promoting a competitive regulatory environment.

Regional policy has supported actions in the area of ICT not only through the mainstream actions but also through INTERREG and the Innovative Actions. Currently about 7 billion Euros for the 2000-2006 programming period are being invested on ICT with almost half of this amount

allocated to infrastructure and the larger share going into services for citizens and enterprises.

I want to see these amounts increased in the future. Providing the regions lagging behind in development with an appropriate infrastructure for information and communication technologies is a precondition to enable them to catch up with the more prosperous regions of the world, thereby unlocking the growth of the whole EU. Regional policy should be used for this purpose because market failure is frequent in such areas.

Hence the investment made by regional policy serves, and will do so increasingly in the future, to ensure the development of infrastructure to make information and communication services and products available at affordable cost. This is even more important where these regions suffer from peripheral location and other barriers to accessibility, such as islands, mountains and the remote and rural areas of the new member states.

In the more developed regions the Commission priorities may be different and focus on a better uptake by companies and the general public of ICT, thus boosting growth and jobs.

ICT investment has multiple applications within such an approach to the projects into which regional policy invests its resources. To name just a few, it can be used to improve accessibility and intelligent urban transport systems, to optimize processes like public procurement,

enterprise creation, tax payments, invoicing, to improve education in schools and in communities. The Commission also seeks to promote an open and competitive digital economy and an inclusive society, for example, by improving accessibility for disabled and elderly people. All this translates into better life of citizens and businesses and increases the city's or regions attractiveness to investors.

I do not want to conclude without mentioning some of our flagship projects such as 'Octopus', in Oulu, Finland, that stands out as a unique example of a network that enables its members to test the latest technologies in the mobile telecommunications sector, and 'Krypto', a project based at the prestigious University of Debrecen (Hungary) that develops software to strengthen the security of computer data, and the project that gathers young researchers and engineers in Sicilian universities to develop digital imaging applications.

There is also a large potential for the projects realized in the educational sector. I recently attended the seminar in Poland which focused on the cluster of these type of projects under a joint title "Digital Poland for everybody", for example providing Internet access to schools in little towns and rural areas. And I can assure you that the influence of relatively little amounts of investment on the job prospects and life careers of pupils of such schools is enormous.

These are the types of projects that I would like to see in the future in all European regions. For this purpose my services are organising with DG

INFSO and DG AGRI a large conference on 'Bridging the Digital Divide' on 14/15 May 2007. You will be most welcome there.

Thank you for your attention,