Information Society and the Regions:
Linking European Policies

**Information Society
and Media**

European Commission

The Information Society brings important benefits for regional policy. To help ensure this promise is fulfilled, the Information Society Policy Link initiative is linking Information Society projects with relevant European policy-makers in areas as diverse as regional innovation strategies and development, employment, quality of life and sustainable development.

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Challenges for Regional Development

Although the EU is one of the richest parts of the world, there are striking internal disparities of income and opportunity between its regions. By supporting poorer regions, EU regional policy is both an instrument of financial solidarity and a powerful force for economic integration. The key values underlying the policy are:

- Solidarity: the policy aims to benefit citizens and regions that are economically and socially deprived;
- Cohesion: there are positive benefits for all in narrowing the gaps of income and wealth.

Big differences in prosperity levels exist both between and within Member States. Even before enlargement, the ten most dynamic regions of the EU had a level of prosperity, measured by GDP per capita, which was nearly three times higher than the ten least developed regions. The entry of ten new member countries in May 2004, whose incomes are well below the EU average, has widened these gaps.

Inequalities have various causes. They may result from longstanding handicaps imposed by geographic remoteness or by more recent social and economic change, or a combination of both. The impact of these disadvantages is frequently evident in social deprivation, poor quality schools, higher unemployment and inadequate infrastructures.

The challenge to policymakers is to make sure that Europe's regions are able to overcome these disparities and make the most of the emerging opportunities. Information and communication technologies (ICT) can help all of the regions of Europe improve their economic performance and the quality of life of the people who live in them. But to achieve this we have to guard against opening up a "digital divide" between those with access to ICT and the ability to use it, and those without

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Regional Policy

The EU's regional policy is built on four Structural Funds:

- the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);
- the European Social Fund (ESF);
- the section of the EU's Common Agricultural Programme (CAP) devoted to rural development;
- financial support for fishing communities as part of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

These funds will pay out about €213 billion, or roughly one third of total EU spending, between 2000 and 2006. A further €18 billion is allocated to the Cohesion Fund, set up in 1993 to finance transport and environment infrastructure in certain Member States (Greece, Ireland, Spain and Portugal). Other initiatives address specific regional circumstances, such as cross-border and inter-regional cooperation, sustainable urban and rural development, and combating inequalities and discrimination in access to the labour market.

With enlargement, the EU has created tailor-made financial programmes for the period 2000-2006 to help the newcomers adjust to membership and to start narrowing the income gap with the rest of the Union. In the meantime, the debate has begun into a new-look and more integrated regional policy for the period 2007-2013 after present programmes run out.

Europe's regional policies and Information Society policies share a number of key aims. Firstly, the EU supports the provision of telecommunications infrastructure, particularly in those cases where market conditions do not result in sufficient investment in certain areas. The eEurope Action Plan identifies broadband access as a particularly important issue.

EU regional policy also aims to stimulate new electronic services and innovative ICT applications in areas such as eBusiness and eGovernment. In addition, policy aims to ensure that people have the necessary skills and capabilities to make the most of the opportunities created by the Information Society.

Where the Information Society Meets the Regions

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have an important part to play in realising the vision of a more cohesive, inclusive Europe.

By bringing people together regardless of the distance between them, the Information Society brings new social and economic opportunities to Europe's regions. It can result in a more balanced development between urban and rural areas. For European citizens, this means that everyone is far less dependent on their location.

Regional development depends very much on the capacity to innovate, and a spirit of entrepreneurship in realising the benefits of ICT. The Regional Innovative Actions Programmes have been launched within the EU Regional Policy framework to experiment with ICTs for regional development. They allow regional authorities to test strategies involving innovation in processes, products and services so as to improve their regional economies.

The regional perspective also features prominently in the eEurope Action Plan. Several of eEurope's priority themes have a regional dimension, including those on eGovernment, eHealth, eBusiness, and affordable and widespread broadband access. The GoDigital initiative, for instance, fostered the creation and development of networks of regional SME communities so as to encourage the take-up of best eBusiness practices.

Information Society Activities

IST Research

Under FP5, the IST Programme addressed the regional dimension through a variety of RTD and take-up actions. As well as projects specifically targeting regional issues, much of the Programme's work on eGovernment and on socio-economic research also had a strong regional dimension.

Many of the activities were undertaken in partnership with established regional networks. These included: the Local Authorities Telematic Network Initiative (ELANET), the European Association of Development Agencies (EURADA), the European Information Society Conference (EISCO), the European Regional Information Society Association (eris@), Telecities, and the Tele Regions Network.

In addition to RTD activities, the Programme supported a series of mid- to large-scale digital economy pilot actions and demonstrations. These aimed to leverage additional private and public funds from regional, national or European sources (including Structural Funds) and had a strong synergy with the eEurope Action Plan.

While the IST Priority has no specific regional objective under the Sixth Framework Programme, relevant projects are supported under the Specific Objectives on Applications and services for the mobile user and worker, Broadband for all, and Networked businesses and governments.

eTEN

The eTEN Programme is concerned with the large-scale roll-out of public interest services, primarily in support of the eEurope Action Plan. Although not specifically a regional programme, eTEN's activities have a strong regional dimension. By strengthening economic and social cohesion in Europe, eTEN aims to reduce disparities between the levels of development of European regions.

Current activities focus on the practical realisation of eEurope objectives on eServices, in areas such as eGovernment, eHealth, eInclusion, eLearning and trust and confidence.

eContent

eContent is a market-oriented programme which aims to support the production, use and distribution of European digital content and to promote linguistic and cultural diversity on the global networks. Certain activities are relevant to regional policy, particularly access to and re-use of public sector information, and promoting multi-linguality in eContent and eService markets.

Digital Vision

Next Steps

The research synopses and policy cases presented here represent only the first stage in linking Information Society activities to EU policies. Information Society & Media DG is now working with Regional Policy DG to establish a policy interface to improve synergies.

A virtuous circle should develop, with improved communication between researchers and policymakers ensuring that:
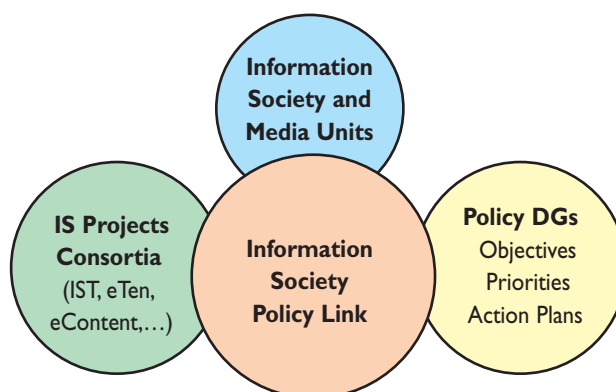
- Information Society & Media programmes better reflect relevant EU policies;
- EU policies better account for Information Society technologies;
- ICTs are better applied to meeting Europe's challenges.

At a later stage, specific actions will be launched addressing policy-makers in national and regional administrations in Member States, European institutions and national parliaments.

Getting Involved

The *Information Society Policy Link* initiative links policy-makers and researchers in a number of ways, so as to leverage the benefits of Information Society & Media projects for European policies. A variety of activities are planned, including a series of Policy Workshops and events targeted at the European policy community.

Project Consortia play a crucial role in the development of this joint effort, providing a valuable source of information for European policy-makers on relevant technological developments, as well as improving the quality, impact and awareness of their own projects for the benefit of EU policies. Organisations involved in past orpresent Information Society projects with relevant activitiesor results areinvited to contact the Initiative at the address shown.

Information Society and Media Units

IS Projects Consortia (IST, eTen, eContent,…)

Information Society Policy Link

Policy DGs
Objectives
Priorities
Action Plans

Information Society Policy Link at a Glance

Information Society related actions constitute a considerable effort of the European Union. For instance, Information Society Technologies (IST) research has been the largest thematic priority in the EU's Fifth (1998-2002) and Sixth (2002-2006) Framework Research Programmes. Together they represent an investment of over €7bn in IST research, and are complemented by programmes such as eContent (€100m) and eTEN (€315m), which focus on digital content and eServices deployment respectively.

The projects funded by these programmes offer benefits to all areas of Europe's economy and society. To fully realise these benefits the technologies need to be linked closely to European policy-making in the relevant areas.

Information Society Policy Link is an initiative of Information Society & Media DG to identify and reinforce links between its projects and relevant EU policies. More than 3000 projects from Information Society programmes are being analysed, identifying a wealth of concrete results that support EU policies across all of the principal policy domains.

By exchanging information and experiences, the Information Society Policy Link initiative aims to ensure that results from European ICT research provide greater leverage, both in implementing current policies and shaping priorities for the future.

Further Information

Information Society Policy Link initiative

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Regional Policy – Innovative Actions

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Europe's Information Society: Thematic Portal

http://europa.eu.int/information_society/