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ON

**THE SOCIAL AND LABOUR MARKET DIMENSION
OF THE
INFORMATION SOCIETY**

People First - The Next Steps

**The Social and Labour Market Dimension
of the Information Society**

People First - The Next Steps

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Executive Summary

The Information Society represents one of the most fundamental changes of our time with enormous opportunities for society as a whole. But the scale and pace of change also present challenges for individuals and certain groups of citizens and regions. Therefore, the social and labour market dimensions of the Information Society need greater prominence within public debate and public policy, as pointed out in the Commission's Agenda 2000.

In order to underline the importance of the social dimension, the Commission appointed in 1995 a High Level Experts Group and an Information Society Forum. The Commission presented in 1996 a Green Paper *Living and Working in the Information Society: People First* as an invitation to political, social and civil dialogue. The Green Paper produced a sustained debate on the social and labour market issues and stressed the need for integrated policy responses across different areas of government.

This Communication summarises the progress made to integrate the social dimension into the development of policies for the Information Society and presents the challenges that lie ahead in reconciling social, economic and technological goals. It forms part of the rolling action plan *Europe at the Forefront of the Global Information Society*. It has three main purposes: to increase awareness of the social implications of the Information Society, to build in an Information Society dimension, where appropriate, into social policies and actions, and to identify specific actions designed to maximise the contribution of the Information Society to promoting employment and inclusion.

1. Common principles for the development of the Information Society

The Green Paper *People First* proposed a set of common principles, based on the ideas and values which have shaped the European Union, to guide the public policies for the Information Society. These principles were broadly supported during the consultation process. The Commission suggests that public policies in the Information Society field should have as basic aims to

- improve access to information
- enhance democracy and social justice
- promote employability and lifelong learning
- strengthen the capacity of the EU economy to achieve high and sustainable growth and employment
- achieve and enhance equal opportunity between men and women
- promote inclusion and support people with special needs and those lacking opportunities to improve their position
- improve the quality and efficiency of public administration.

2. Access to ICT¹ in learning, working and living

Access to the tools of the Information Society is of fundamental importance for achieving the goals of equity and efficiency set out above. Access has different dimensions: availability, continuity, affordability, accessibility and awareness. How well these dimensions are dealt with will tilt the balance towards an inclusive or exclusive society. Public policies can make the difference. The Commission therefore urges that the Member States make access a main objective in the development of national information strategies. The Commission will address this issue in its forthcoming review of the scope, quality, level, and affordability of universal service. It will also organise exchange of experience, discussions, evaluation and benchmarking of strategies and policies in particular those facilitating access. In line with the views expressed by the European Parliament, the Commission will invite collaboration with the other Community Institutions to draw up a communication strategy facilitating access to public information. The question of gender balance in the Information Society must be given more attention to ensure that the potential benefits are equally shared and to avoid the risk of reinforcing existing segregations. The Commission will further develop initiatives at various levels to improve access to ICT for people with disability and to promote awareness of the potential of ICT to improve health systems. The Commission has proposed that the creation of a user-friendly Information Society be one of the key objectives of the forthcoming 5th RTD Framework Programme.

3. Flexibility and security in working life

ICT offer great potential for improved productivity and thereby prosperity through new ways of work organisation. The Green Paper *People First* introduced the concept of a new balance between flexibility for enterprises and security for workers as a basis for such a modern organisation of work. The Commission has taken this idea forward through the new Green Paper on *Partnership for a New Organisation of Work* in order to stimulate the social partners to develop a framework for a more productive, participative and learning organisation of work. Parallel with this debate, the Commission has proposed to strengthen European research on new organisation of work under the 5th RTD Framework Programme. A European network of national institutes in this field will be developed. The Commission will present a Communication in 1998 analysing the situation regarding the privacy of data on employees. The Commission will initiate consultations with the social partners regarding the framework for developing telework; and enhance the role of social dialogue to facilitate structural change and develop ICT as a tool for policies for health and safety at work.

4. Employability for more and better jobs

The creation of more and better jobs is one of the most pressing needs for the Member States in the EU. Modernisation of the economies and improvement of productivity are prerequisites. The use of ICT is a key question. However, a fundamental structural obstacle for employment growth is the slow adjustment of skills to new economic and technological structures. This is why the European employment strategy, reinforced by the European Council in Amsterdam, increasingly emphasises employability as a key to improve the functioning of the labour markets. A new culture of life-long education, training and learning is required, supported by selective restructuring of public expenditures in favour of investment in human resources. The Commission will continue to support human resource investment through Objective 4 of the European Social Fund

¹ Information and Communication Technologies.

and the Community Initiative *ADAPT*. A further allocation of 162 MECU has been made for the purpose of Building the Information Society (*ADAPT-BIS*) for the period 1997-99. The Commission is also supporting measures to exploit the employment potential of the social economy. To improve the functioning of the labour market the Commission will encourage the development and use of ICT to modernise Public Employment Services and the linking of national vacancy systems via EURES.

5. Action at national, European and international level

The last chapter summarises how the Commission will strengthen the social dimension through action at all levels:

- at **national and regional level**, where the Commission will provide support to the Member States to integrate a strong social dimension in the ongoing development of their Information Society strategies
- at **Community level**, where the Commission will mainstream the social dimension in all relevant Community policies and exploit the potential of the ICT as a tool in employment and social policies
- at **international level**, where the Commission will promote in the appropriate international fora the development and use of technologies which can help improve social cohesion and the improvement of living, learning and working conditions for all groups in society.

I. People First - the next steps: the purpose of this Communication

1. The development of the Information Society offers enormous opportunities to improve the way in which Europeans live and work. But the scale and pace of technological change in an increasingly global economy also present a number of challenges for our societies. The process of change has to be managed in a way that promotes trust and confidence in the possibilities of the Information Society to improve people's quality of life. The Commission highlighted the importance of these issues in its 1994 Action Plan *Europe's way to the Information Society*, and in July 1996 presented a Green Paper *Living and Working in the Information Society: People First*¹.
2. The Green Paper sought comments on how best to reap the full benefits of the Information Society, in particular in the areas of work organisation, employment, and social cohesion, and invited reflection on a set of common principles for the development of the Information Society in Europe. It also drew on the work of two independent groups set up by the Commission: a High Level Group of Experts (HLGE) on the social aspects of the Information Society and a broadly based Information Society Forum (ISF). The first reports² of both groups were published as complements to the Green Paper, and in April 1997 the HLGE presented its Final Report³, which underpins this Communication.
3. The consultation process - which was officially launched at a Colloquium in Dublin in September 1996⁴ - triggered a lively debate at three interrelated levels: political dialogue, social dialogue, and civil dialogue. In total, more than 130 responses were submitted⁵, of which more than 40% came from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The debate has demonstrated broad agreement around the following points:
 - if the Information Society is to be to the benefit of all, it needs to develop with a strong social dimension, not only integrating social policy into the Information Society, but also using the Information Society as a tool to promote a more inclusive and learning society;
 - particular attention is needed to avoid the risk that the Information Society might exacerbate existing divisions within society. People are concerned about how it will affect their jobs and about the risks of creating a society of information "haves" and "have nots";
 - while the move to the Information Society is essentially market-driven, public authorities have an important role to play in shaping this process, striking a balance between policies to enhance equality of opportunity and security and policies to promote flexibility and adaptability;
 - while prime responsibility rests with the Member States, the EU has an important role to play.
4. This Communication - which forms part of the Commission's Rolling Action Plan *Europe at the Forefront of the Global Information Society*⁶ - sets out the Commission's strategy to further develop the social dimension of the Information Society, in particular in the context of Agenda 2000. It has three main purposes:
 - to co-ordinate the process of *increasing awareness* of the labour market and social implications of the Information Society;
 - to *build in an Information Society dimension*, where appropriate, into social policies and actions, especially at European level;
 - to *identify specific actions* designed to maximise the contribution of the Information Society to promoting employment and social inclusion.

¹ The regional dimension of the Information Society has been covered in the Commission Communication *Cohesion and the Information Society* COM (97) 7.

² *Building the Information Society for Us All*. First Reflections of the High Level Group of Experts, January 1996; *Networks for People and their Communities*. First Annual Report from the Information Society Forum. June 1996.

³ *Building the Information Society for Us All*. Final Report of the High Level Group of Experts, April 1997.

⁴ The documents *Report on the Dublin Colloquium* and *Source Document on the Dublin Colloquium* present a summary and the details of the discussions held during the Conference, *in situ* and in the web site created for this occasion.

⁵ A detailed account of the responses officially submitted will be published by the Commission as a separate document. 25,000 printed copies were distributed, and the web site was accessed about 20,000 times.

⁶ COM (96)607

5. In particular, it builds on the **common principles** set out in the Green Paper - and broadly supported during the consultation - which suggested that public policies for the Information Society should have as basic aims to:
- facilitate access to information;
 - enhance democracy and social justice;
 - promote employability and lifelong learning;
 - strengthen the capacity of the EU economy to achieve high and sustainable growth and employment;
 - achieve and enhance equal opportunity between men and women;
 - promote inclusion and support people with special needs and those lacking opportunities to improve their position;
 - improve the quality and efficiency of public administration.
6. Member States have the main policy responsibilities for the matters addressed in this Communication. During the consultation the Commission held meetings with the Member States to exchange information about current initiatives. A significant number have developed strategic plans or programmes for the Information Society⁷, a further group are drafting green papers which should be followed by concrete action plans⁸ and the rest have initiatives, projects or programmes promoting research or the implementation of applications in particular areas. The main social aspects considered relate to access, education and training, electronic access to Government information, preservation of cultural heritage and demonstration projects of applications of public interest.
7. The co-existence of local, regional, national and European strategies and initiatives calls for complementarity and co-ordination of the different actions. The Commission, for its part, through its own strategy and programmes, can contribute to the development of the social dimension of the Information Society by:
- supporting the Member States in developing and implementing their strategies and programmes;
 - taking specific initiatives in its areas of responsibility;
 - taking account of the Information Society within social policy and other policies;
 - ensuring that social needs are fully taken into consideration in the Community RTD programmes⁹;
 - acting at international level.
8. The European Strategy for the Information Society established in 1994 has already been proved successful and has had a strong impact in many policy areas, both at European and national level. In order to grasp the opportunities offered by the Information Society, the Commission believes that the social dimension needs to be further strengthened. That was the stimulus behind the Green Paper *People First*. This Communication sets out the Commission's future strategy in this area.

II. An Information Society for All

II.1 Access to the Information Society: public policies can make the difference

9. In order to reap both the economic and social benefits of technological progress and to improve people's quality of life, the Information Society must be based on the principles of equal opportunities, participation and integration of all. This can only happen if everybody has access to at least a basic set of the new services and applications offered by the Information Society. Access has different dimensions: availability, continuity, affordability, accessibility, and awareness. How well

⁷ Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Finland, Sweden and United Kingdom.

⁸ Spain, Portugal and Austria.

⁹ The Commission has proposed that one of the technological and scientific objectives of the forthcoming 5th RTD Framework Programme be the creation of a user-friendly Information Society.

these dimensions are dealt with will tilt the balance towards an inclusive or an exclusive society. Public policies can make the difference.

10. Modern infrastructure, applications and services should be *available* at *affordable* prices. Industry will maximise its efforts in this respect if Governments provide an adequate regulatory framework which promotes fair competition and innovation. For this to happen, Member States must respect the timetable agreed for the liberalisation of telecommunication markets, which will increase the competitiveness of the telecoms sector and of the economy as a whole, opening up new opportunities for the private sector to deliver new applications and services. In order to ensure that all regions benefit from the liberalisation process, the Commission has recommended that Member States give priority to the completion and upgrading of telecom networks and supplement them with demand stimulation measures¹⁰.
11. The Commission has also encouraged Member States to reflect on the scope of *universal service* and on the concept of *public access*. The inclusion by the Amsterdam Treaty of a new article on services of general economic interest underlines the importance of this issue, in particular for disadvantaged groups and those living in rural and peripheral regions. Technological development and liberalisation processes have reduced dramatically the cost of storing, processing and transmission of data. However the price of communications and ICT hardware and software can still be a barrier. The availability of personal computers and Internet access in the home remains predominantly the preserve of those with higher income and educational attainment levels.
12. This rapidly changing technological context means that universal service is a dynamic and evolving concept which must be kept under review if it is to respond to people's needs and expectations. Access to advanced services and applications through public access points such as libraries, schools, and other community meeting points is regarded by some as a proxy to universal services. In a similar vein, the HLGE recommends investigation of the concept of "universal community service", extending universal service provision so as to incorporate a basic level of access to new information services, but limiting its universality obligation to some institutions. Furthermore, the Competitiveness Advisory Group has recommended the creation of knowledge resource centres to facilitate access to knowledge on the new technologies and the skills required¹¹.
13. Equal access is predicated on *accessibility*. IT hardware and services should be designed in such a way that they do not discriminate against certain groups, raising barriers and excluding them from their use. The concept of "universal design" may provide ways forward¹² and research programmes and industry should strengthen their efforts to address the barriers presented by inappropriate design. More generally, the user-friendliness of software and hardware is decisive, especially for elderly people who may face problems in accessing the new technological environment. For instance accessing the Internet via TV could enable many more people to use the new services of the Information Society.
14. Access also depends on people's *awareness* of the possibilities offered by the Information Society. Effective and equitable awareness-building requires that people are trained in the use of the new technologies and that ICT be introduced into our educational systems, especially in schools. There is some evidence of low public awareness of the technologies and how to participate in the Information Society, particularly among women, unemployed and non-office workers. Raising ICT awareness among older people is becoming increasingly important, in particular in the context of demographic trends, lifelong learning and the establishment of flexible paths of transition from work to retirement. Some Member States are targeting particular groups through awareness campaigns. The Commission's recent call for proposals of the multiannual programme on Information Society

¹⁰ Communication from the Commission *Cohesion and the Information Society*, COM (97) 7

¹¹ *Enhancing European Competitiveness*. Competitiveness Advisory Group, December 1995.

¹² For instance, the Danish Government is developing pilot activities for promoting co-operation to develop "universal design" IT products and services.

focuses on studies, demonstration actions and other accompanying measures including actions targeted at specific social groups¹³.

Objective:

Ensure access for all by promoting availability, affordability, accessibility and awareness

Key actions:

The Commission :

- urges Member States to ensure that access is a key objective of their Information Society strategies;
- will review and report on the scope, quality, level and affordability of universal service by January 1st, 1998 and report on the functioning of the Directive on the application of Open Network Provision for telephony and on universal service before December 31st, 1999;
- will continue to develop awareness actions and will organise, on the basis of the European Survey of Information Society Projects and Actions (ESIS), exchange of experience, discussions, evaluation and benchmarking of strategies and policies, in particular those facilitating access.
- will examine the feasibility of knowledge resource centres to facilitate access to the Information Society technologies and skills.

II.2. Enhancing Democracy and Public Services

15. The advent of network based communications such as the Internet has allowed much simpler and cheaper dissemination of information, allowing local, regional, national, and international communication to flourish alongside more traditional forms of mass media. However, the development and image of a vigorous Information Society will be hampered if existing standards and practice in the public media are flouted, for example by undermining pluralism, or by permitting uncontrolled access to violent, racist, or pornographic material on the Internet. The Commission has addressed this latter issue in its Green Paper on the protection of minors and human dignity in the information and audio-visual services¹⁴ and in its Communication on illegal and harmful content on the Internet¹⁵.
16. There is also the issue of open government and the way public policies can exploit the potential of ICT to support democratic processes and rights, for example by developing electronic democracy, enhancing access to public documentation, and by developing specific services for groups lacking ready access to information (eg migrant workers and their dependants). The benefits of including the European institutions in open government initiatives would be substantial and therefore specific pilot initiatives should be launched. Public info-kiosks and access points can play a vital role in bridging the gap in providing access to information for public service purposes. Closer and more effective interaction with government at local and regional level may be one of the most rapid ways of demonstrating the potential of the Information Society. Some regions and localities have already formed networks to learn, to inform and to exchange developments. Initiatives such as IRIS Initiative¹⁶, the RISI¹⁷ pilot projects and the *Bangemann Challenge*¹⁸ competition have contributed substantially to raising awareness and to dissemination of good practice examples.
17. The Commission is preparing a Green Paper *on Access to and Exploitation of Public Sector Information* to stimulate discussion on the options for Community policy action to ensure the respect of the rights of people to have access to public sector information and the conditions for commercial

¹³ Cf. Call for Proposals 97/C 148 / 07 of the Commission. O.J. N° C 148/15 of 16.5.97.

¹⁴ COM (96) 486

¹⁵ COM (96) 487

¹⁶ Inter-Regional Information Society Initiative, gathering Valencia, Piemonte, Central Macedonia, Saxony, Nord Pas-de-Calais and North West England, to build strategies for shaping the Information Society in these regions and exchange experiences.

¹⁷ Regional Information Society Initiative projects carried out in the framework of article 6 of the European Social Fund Regulation and article 10 of the European Regional Development Fund Regulation.

¹⁸ Competition in the use of information technologies in cities of similar size, launched by the City of Stockholm in 1994.

