

ICT FOR A GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

How ICT can durably contribute to the wellbeing of all citizens around the world



International Conference
European Commission – Brussels
January 22 – 23, 2009

Speech

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We are used to hearing that the greatest challenge being faced by the world this century is that of climate change. Recent worldwide events have proven to us that global sustainability is not only about dealing with climate change but really with the effective management of our resources, our natural resources, our financial resources and our people resources in terms of social sustainability.

ICT is key to global sustainability; this conference is a testimony to such. In the EUs Recovery plan related to the financial crisis our countries are facing, ICT has been identified as one of the tools for successfully dealing with this unprecedented crisis. The Recovery Plan places a huge amount of importance on broadband infrastructure, ICT services and sustainable telecommunications. This is the opportunity to have a ‘green’ economic recovery and definitely economic activities which are part of such a green economy, including ICT, stand to benefit.

Moving on the sustainable management of our natural resources I will focus on 2 issues.

The advancement of technologies in the field has made it possible that today management of resources can be fragmented further and spread across the globe so as to minimise the impact of exploitation of land by spreading it more evenly across the earth.

Traditionally people aggregated in cities and businesses in industrial zones. The need to aggregate, and population concentration, was partly brought about by our communication requirements, and the need to be in close proximity to central working areas attune to business development. ICT is a fundamental tool

in bringing about a fragmentation of population conglomerates, which by nature do restrain sustainability of land and natural resources. By having a strong communication infrastructure businesses can operate not only from remote locations in which labour tends to be economically viable, as is currently the case, but also from remote locations which are sustainable in terms of the impact to their surroundings. One may highlight that such a model would be particularly easy for SMEs to take up.

At this point I believe noteworthy is the emphasis the EU recovery plan makes on the aspect of High-speed Internet for all, which targets to reach 100% coverage across the member states by 2010.

Another area in which ICT has a key role in sustainability is that of energy efficiency, the EESC has in fact often pronounced itself in this respect and also recently adopted a position vis a vis the Commissions Communication on the Addressing the Challenges of energy efficiency through Information and Communication Technology (COMM (2008) 241 final).

Technology is instrumental in achieving the efficiency of our energy grid by effectively monitoring and measuring our man made systems in order to ensure that energy is being utilised in a maximised manner. It is needed so as to identifying possible losses within the grid and dealing intelligently with the proper distribution of energy within the grid; analysing consumption patterns and adapting flow accordingly. Third generation web platform enables the management of the inputs and outputs within the power grid by achieving communication between systems.

The application of ICTs in different economic areas, at both the production and consumption stages, will allow "dematerialisation" of many procedures and replacement of physical and material exchanges by online services, also saving energy. However, the Committee also believes it is important to introduce energy-saving throughout the process of manufacturing and using technological devices rather than focusing solely on energy-efficient consumption during the useful life of the device. Our manufacturing technologies not only need to be High Value in terms of their engineering but also in terms of the methods and processes involved in the manufacturing process.

Furthermore the EESC believes that ICT is the answer to having more energy efficient equipment in terms of:

- Household appliances
- Smart buildings
- Smart transportation
- Smart lighting

None of all we mention here is easy. It is achievable, it is required but it is not easy. The R&D can be done, the industry can supply the hardware and software, but the biggest challenge is the “wetware” as the Economist puts it – the people, economics and politics.

This is primarily what the European Economic and Social Committee deals with. The aim of the EESC is to be a bridge between Europe and Civil society. In its consultative capacity the Committee brings together representatives from the economic, social and special interest groups. Embracing the true principle of participatory democracy. The committee is in fact composed of Employer organisations, Worker representatives and Civil Society representatives from the 27 Member States who together come up with a common position on issues consulted upon by the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. This makes the Committee a unique institution based upon consensus of the different economic and social partners.

Sustainability has been a key area to the Committee in the last few years and this has been materialised with the establishment of the Sustainability Observatory within the same Committee who specifically takes positions in relation to the area of sustainability so as to effectively influence People, Economics and Politics.

A final remark goes to the key role of ICT in education. Change, painful as it may be, is brought about by education. Education for Global Sustainability is vital across the globe. Achieving this in a fast and effective manner can only be done through the use of ICT, not only in our schools, with our children; but across the globe with policy makers, educators and civil society.

Furthermore we should not forget that first and foremost technology is for the service of people and people should be the focus of our endeavours so as to also achieve sustainability in social terms. People should be the focus of our technological developments.

We are living in difficult times and experiencing unprecedented circumstances. Nonetheless this is truly the period of opportunity for the “green” economy, opportunity for sustainable production and consumption and definitely ICT is a key instrument in achieving this. Never as much as today has ICT such a key role in ensuring sustainability.