

ICT for a Global Sustainable Future

9 a.m., 23 January 2009

Charlemagne building, European Commission, Brussels

Intervention of Keith Walters (Opening Address)

Introduction to the Committee of the Regions' work on ICT

The Committee of the Regions was set up in 1994 to address two main issues. Firstly, about three quarters of EU legislation is implemented at local or regional level, so it makes sense for local and regional representatives to have a say in the development of new EU laws. Secondly, there were concerns that the public was being left behind as the EU steamed ahead. Involving the elected level of government closest to the citizens was one way of closing the gap. The EC Treaties oblige the European Commission and the Council to consult the Committee of the Regions whenever new proposals are made in areas that have repercussions at regional or local level. One area of such compulsory consultation is in the area of technological development.

The CoR attaches much importance to increasing the role of ICTs for more sustainable economic growth both by making full use of all the opportunities already existing ICT can bring in this regard, as well as by encouraging regions to engage in ICT innovation, and research & technology developments.

In general terms, local and regional authorities have a crucial role to play in exploiting the potential of ICT in promoting coherence between economic, environmental and social needs for the following reasons:

Firstly, they can take leadership in using ICT for new models of workplace and mobility management or for increasing energy efficiency of public buildings as well as applying green public procurement.

Secondly, they support ICT for social and territorial cohesion. For the CoR it is crucial to ensure broadband access in less-favoured and rural regions where the market fails, so to support territorial cohesion. Public authorities within such regions have already successfully used public intervention for broadband supply.

Thirdly, local and regional authorities are responsible for e-governance of their communities. We believe that e-government provides a major opportunity to modernise government service delivery and the interaction with citizens and businesses.

Fourthly, local and regional authorities manage natural resources. In many Member States, local and regional authorities are vested with direct responsibilities and powers in services and policies

such as land use and urban planning, regional innovation and business development, water and energy supply, transport systems, even in disaster management or consumer education.

ICT for a Sustainable future - the local and regional dimension

Firstly the CoR underlines that every citizen has the right to know what their elected representatives are doing to ensure the sustainability of their environment for future generations. Secondly, local action is key to meeting the 20% energy efficiency targets. Sustainable development objectives cannot be effectively implemented without the involvement of local and regional authorities given that in many Member States local and regional authorities have a central role to play in educating the public about new technologies available that can contribute to a sustainable consumer behaviour.

Having said that, the contribution to a sustainable future is particularly difficult in regions which face special technological challenges because of location or the structure of the community such as in remote areas and the outermost regions, or owing to insufficient infrastructure, poor purchase and maintenance budgets, unequal opportunities for accessing information. We know that there are profound differences between regions. We know that some of them may be particularly affected by climate change, and that the ability to adapt, which is distributed unevenly among the various sectors and regions, is closely bound up with socioeconomic development; in this regard, regions and local authorities have an important role to play.

The Covenant of Mayors¹

The CoR supports the European Commission's initiative on the Covenant of Mayors. We believe that by promoting sustainable energy and energy efficiency, the Covenant of Mayors can spur on the cities and regions to implement changes to protect their most vulnerable citizens, particularly those on low and fixed incomes, from the effect of high energy prices and from suffering fuel poverty. In doing so, however, care should be taken to avoid subsidising energy use and to allow scope for strong incentives to improve energy efficiency and, as far as possible, reduce energy use.

Regional and local authorities have already started to undertake activities and initiatives which will contribute to the goals and objectives of EU climate change policy, showing leadership with the bold and necessary decision to increase energy efficiency for the benefit of their citizens and the environment.

¹ The **Covenant of Mayors** is an ambitious initiative of the European Commission that will bring together the mayors of Europe's most pioneering cities in a permanent network to exchange and apply good practices across these cities and beyond to improve energy efficiency significantly in the urban environment. The Covenant of Mayors is the response of the most active cities to global warming: a formal commitment by the cities to reduce their CO₂ emissions even beyond the EU 20% objectives. Almost 100 cities throughout Europe, including 15 capitals, have expressed their willingness to join.

Regions, like towns and cities, are key players in the field of ICT for sustainable growth having responsibilities in numerous activities which deal with planning, permitting, investment, procurement, production and consumption. Transport, housing and public buildings, and public lighting infrastructure, which are planned for and provided by local and regional authorities, are both areas where significant CO₂ reductions and energy savings can be achieved.

We emphasise the impact which a general goal of reduction in consumption of both consumer goods and natural resources such as water will make on reducing emissions and energy use. In many cases, regions can have a wider impact on behavioural change than individual local authorities and thus are well placed to influence citizens to change behaviours as they operate across both urban and rural areas.

Therefore we advocate a major role for regions and hope that the competent regional bodies will encourage the numerous municipalities within their respective areas to take part.

We must also emphasise the leadership role regions could play in identifying local ICT opportunities for action, sharing technological best practice, identifying project partners, allocating funding to invest in ICT tools, measuring progress and communicating success. Local initiatives should be embedded in a regional or national framework to maximise the impact and enable opportunities for partnerships to emerge. In addition they should be free to set themselves ambitious targets, which are sustainable, exceeding those in national frameworks.

However, short term budgetary pressures challenge regions and cities who take medium to long term investment and policy decisions to improve their own energy efficiency, to promote the use of sustainable energy sources and reduce CO₂ emissions. National performance assessment targets should take this into account.

The CoR calls for EU funding and financing to be adapted in order to prioritise actions to promote sustainable energy use such as an increase in the percentage of regional funding to be spent on improving the energy efficiency of domestic homes from 3% to 5%. EIB loans should be readily accessible for local authorities and regions willing to invest in technologies that increase energy efficiency, to promote the use of sustainable energy sources and to reduce CO₂ emissions.

The CoR suggests therefore that the mid-term review of EU funding programmes needs to look at how the full range of programmes can be adapted to support energy efficiency, promote sustainable energy sources and reduce CO₂ emissions, and ensure programmes to improve energy efficiency are accessible to regions and cities. Thus, for instance, possible revisions, in addition to an increase of regional/cohesion funding to support the energy efficiency of domestic homes, should include greater investment to support the commercialisation of new technologies under programmes such as FP7. A review of the regulations governing state aids may also be necessary in order for measures to be taken in the area of industrial change and energy conversion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Europe's regions and local authorities can be key movers for driving forward ICT applications which improve sustainability. The Committee of the Regions is willing to raise the awareness of this local and regional potential.

Local and regional authorities have a strategic place in promoting a sustainable future through ICT. They are able to promote multi-dimensional partnerships and networks bringing together all relevant actors benefiting the whole community.

We have continuously in this respect called for the promotion of networks at EU level and the promotion of exchanges of best practice, in particular coordinated by local and regional authorities. These exchanges like today are particularly valuable in tackling the challenges of the information society by discovering together new projects and learning more about the creativity that exists in bringing forward educational success by means of ICT.