

UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF), Hyderabad, 3-6 December 2008
Elements for the Council of Europe's written contribution:

“Accessibility of Internet as a key factor for participation and full inclusion of people with disability in society”

Access to information and communication is a key aspect for participation in society¹. If people with disabilities are to exercise their rights actively, participate and make choices about their lives, it is essential that they can access information through adequate communication systems. For many people with disabilities, however, information and communication continue to be largely inaccessible.

Ongoing developments in information and communication technologies and practices are changing the way in which citizens interact with each other, conduct business, access services and information and communicate generally. Technological advancements include the Internet, eCommunication facilities, videophones, etc. It is important that all citizens benefit from such technological advancements and that no group be excluded, in particular people with disabilities.

Public bodies have a particular duty to ensure that their information is accessible in a range of formats responding to the diverse needs of people with disabilities. Such bodies should also be models of best practice for the private sector, and all those providing services to people with disabilities, who should be encouraged to adopt such practices also. Communication systems must also be accessible to people with disabilities. There are already good examples of the types of systems that can be used, such as telephone relay systems or text and video communication systems.

People with disabilities should be consulted regarding the development of standards and the design of new communication and information systems. If we are to have a truly inclusive society, people with disabilities must be able to use information and communication systems along with everyone else.

It is estimated that about 10 percent of the world population have a disability, and there is still a lot to be done to ensure full enjoyment of human rights and inclusion of people with disabilities. It is striking that today, in the 21st century, a great number of people with disabilities cannot get the education they wish, choose to work according to their abilities and interests, vote or enjoy the artistic performances – basically live – as any other members of society. Why is that so? How could societies use the technological developments to allow for an improved accessibility, greater participation and full inclusion of all people without discrimination? The Council of Europe is putting special emphasis on the rights of people with disabilities. How can they benefit most from improved access to the Internet?

New technologies, and Internet in particular, can in certain cases compensate for disability in daily living, generate independence and social integration and lessen the workload of personal assistants in a number of cases. Moreover, new technologies can focus attention more on people's abilities and less on their disabilities. Teleworking and Internet offer people with disabilities a chance to participate in society and to communicate with non-disabled people.

One example would be democratic participation. Today we can move from e-Voting to e-Participation, and from e-Participation to e-Inclusion. The Council of Europe decided to act through the:

- E-voting² and E-governance³ recommendations – they call for new means to strengthen democratic participation;

¹ Recommendation Rec(2006)5 adopted on 5 April 2006.

² Recommendation Rec(2005)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on legal, operational and technical standards for e-voting, adopted on 30 September 2004.

- Focus on the full citizenship of persons with disabilities through inclusive new technologies⁴
- Finally – through the adoption of the Council of Europe plan to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society: improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in Europe 2006-2015⁵, with a particular focus, in one of its action lines, on the full inclusion through accessible new technologies, and, in particular, the Internet (e.g.: “public bodies make their information and communications accessible for people with disabilities, including their websites which shall comply with current international accessibility guidelines”).

Other benefits could be quoted, in fields such as: e-Tourism (strengthening the right to move freely inside one’s own country and between countries); and e-Commerce (promoting barrier-free trade and the creation of new services (e.g. home delivery of consumer goods purchased over Internet).

The notion of public service value of the Internet is rather new. “Public” means, first of all, “for the people”, meaning all of them. Internet is a major factor. It can allow for greater accessibility to public services, like secured electronic voting procedures. It can also create new dangers, as abuse or human trafficking facilitated through Internet. Therefore, the issues related to Internet, such as e-Accessibility and e-Inclusion, are of particular relevance for people with disabilities. States have to make sure that services rendered to citizens are of high quality and of value to all the members of society, including persons with disabilities. Internet can facilitate this. We have to look at the Internet as both a service in its own right and as a means to reach other services. The appropriate use of Internet can and should make people’s lives more fulfilling, of greater quality, and provide an easier access to all sorts of information and services. Internet can, therefore, be treated as a “public service” rendered to individual citizens. The greater the quality of “service for all”-- the higher the value of that service.

All services should be designed keeping in mind the Universal Design principles. The Council of Europe Disability Action Plan 2006-2015 is addressing also the issue of Universal Design. Its wide application and user participation in all design stages is of paramount importance for improving accessibility, meaning also, Internet access and accessibility of public services via Internet (the so-called, e-accessibility). It calls for giving opportunities to express themselves to people, for whom services, products, or even, building⁶ are made, thus allowing for the appropriate products or services to be delivered. It must, definitely, be taken into account when developing new information technologies and related services, thus ensuring that e-Accessibility leads to e-Inclusion for all people, including people with disabilities. This can be achieved by applying Universal Design principles. On 12 December 2007, the Council of Europe adopted the Resolution ResAP(2007)3 “Achieving full participation through Universal Design”. The Resolution invites member states governments to take full advantage of the potential of Universal Design in facilitating the promotion of equal rights of all citizens in all aspects of society. Specific recommendations are given as to the adoption of policies, co-ordination of government actions, implementation and evaluation of programmes in this field.

³ Recommendation Rec(2004)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic governance (“e-governance”), adopted on 15 December 2004.

⁴ ResAP(2001)3 towards full citizenship of persons with disabilities through inclusive new technologies.

⁵ Recommendation Rec(2006)5 adopted on 5 April 2006.

⁶ Resolution ResAP(2001)1 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the introduction of the principles of Universal Design into the curricula of all occupations working on the built environment.