

AVAILABILITY OF ONLINE ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES AT REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

1) GENERAL COMMENTS

The availability of online access to public services is sometimes called eGOVERNMENT. I prefer to call it eGOVERNANCE for the benefit of a new kind of citizenship and for better life conditions.

ePublic services constitute a response to new citizen and social needs such as high quality services, more efficiency and productivity quick answers, disappearance or diminution of boring situations such as queuing up for hours. It means also cutting red tape, more userfriendliness and personalized attention, diminution of the cost of administrative obligations especially for SMEs

The public services have a boosting effect on the economy. They represent, according to the different EU countries, between 20% and 60% of the GDP.

eGOVERNANCE cannot be obtained only by the use of ICT but must be combined with organization changes, new kinds of relationship with citizens, associations and industrialists, in order to improve public services and democratic process. It requests new skills and new systems of education and training, the renewal of personnel and therefore leads to the creation of new jobs.

The appearance of good local administrations, new health care organizations, new education and training systems, a relatively low cost (2,3 % of the GDP in average) may be considered as balancing the perverse effects of a liberal economy reinforced by the individual use of ICTs..

However the introduction of eGOVERNANCE is not easy. Providing user-centered services and cutting red tape require that information is shared across departments and different levels of governance (e.g. between local, regional and national levels) and sharing is not always the main quality of people. It also requires willingness to rethink established ways of working. This often leads to resistance. Moreover, eGOVERNANCE is not free. Even if the cost is not too high, the pay-off may take time.

There are difficult issues to resolve for obtaining a full scale implementation of eGovernance. These include safeguarding trust and confidence in online interaction with the public services administrations, widespread access to online services so that no digital divide is created, interoperability for information exchange across organizational and political borders

Strong political leadership is needed to overcome resistance and barriers, to change mindsets; to push through organizational change, to sustain investment and to keep long perspective in mind while insisting on concrete deliverables in the shorter term.

Those services cannot be delivered without new telecom networks (broadband networks whichever they may be : ADSL optic fibers, satellites, and equipments (computers, softwares,

etc) which remain rather costly. Moreover the financial efforts requested from public administrations may be important when, at the same time, they have to cope with tighter budgets.