

## Can ICT help the European Union meet the needs of its ageing population?

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AGE is the European Older People's Platform. It is a European network of 150 organisations of older people in Europe. We are represented in the 25 Member States and the two accession countries, Bulgaria and Romania.

AGE aims to voice and promote the interests of those over 50 in the European Union and we are involved in a range of policy, information and lobbying activities to put older people's issues on the EU agenda and to support networking among older people's groups.

Our guiding principles is that a change of attitudes is needed to achieve a society for all ages, seeking solidarity between generations in a way that recognizes older people's contributions to society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In our view, the current debate on demographic change must be approached realistically. AGE believes that the increased life expectancy and improved health of older people is one of the proudest achievements of recent social and economic development in Europe.

The EU and worldwide political debate has focused too much on the quantitative changes in an ageing society: pensions and health care expenditure, older worker employment rates, old-age dependency ratios, etc. And the development of new technologies is promoted with the aim to help limit the cost associated with the ageing of our population. These are important discussions, but the necessary qualitative changes to the economic, social and political structures of society deserve equal attention.

### **Cohesive technology**

All citizens living in the European Union should be in a position to benefit from new technologies regardless of their age. The main concern for AGE in the development of new systems and new services for older people is to ensure that technology is cohesive and not divisive. This means that everyone in the EU should be able to benefit from an increased application of new technologies, and not just the educated and wealthy who are, in many cases, already digitally literate. In this regard, the e-Inclusion initiative launched by the Commission i.e. "using ICT to remove obstacles, which limit or prevent people's participation in the economy and wider society"<sup>1</sup> is a step in the right direction. Within this context, the European Commission has decided after Member States agreed in a Ministerial declaration<sup>2</sup> in Riga on the 11 of June, to launch a communication this October on "ICT and Ageing" where it will explain that ICT need to be tailored to meet the needs of an ageing population regarding health, work, quality of life and assistance<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/information\\_society/eeurope/i2010/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/i2010/index_en.htm) (COM (2006) 215)

<sup>2</sup> <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/06/237&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&quiLan>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.eu2006.bmsg.gv.at/cms/eu2006EN/attachments/3/7/5/CH0631/CMS1142844810665/declaration\\_riga\\_en.pdf](http://www.eu2006.bmsg.gv.at/cms/eu2006EN/attachments/3/7/5/CH0631/CMS1142844810665/declaration_riga_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Commission is promising the industry new markets and Members States solutions of cutting social costs linked to ageing. The aim of the Communication will be to carry out coherent actions at European level by introducing an action plan and an open method of coordination based on the exchange of good practices between Member States. The Communication will identify three areas where the industry has every interest in investing: the independent living of older people, their professional life and participation in society. The idea is to encourage Member States and the industry to enhance accessibility in order to enable older people, disabled people and those with limited computer skills to increase their awareness and understanding of these technologies and to make better use of them in their daily lives. The document will place particular emphasis on eAccessibility (COM (2005) 425 final) i.e. ensure universal access to ICTs by

Today's conference is a useful opportunity to encourage researchers, policy makers and civil society in general to take serious commitments not only to studying the needs of older people and the socio-economic impact of new technologies on these but also to support the development of new technologies that are fully inclusive and accessible to all.

### **Advantages of ICT for older people**

Technology can aid older people's daily lives such as preventing of or compensating for age-related mobility functions; creating of new social networks, developing educational and artistic activities; and giving practical or technical support to caregivers of persons needing care. For example, technology has aided in the domains of housekeeping (such as user friendly, comfortable, barrier free design and safe domestic appliances), particularly for older people with motor constraints<sup>4</sup>. Technology has also helped older people and people with disabilities to continue to live at home (commonly designated as Ambient Assisted Living), to maintain their autonomy and dignity and to achieve a better quality of life and ultimately to enhance independent living and place as a valued member of society.

Technology has had an important role in the area of communication, from traditional telephones to mobile phones to interactive modes of video communication and email, the Internet and multimedia, among others. These have helped older people to keep in touch with their relatives and friends (non isolation) and overcome long distances despite their limited physical mobility and sensory impairments. They have also helped them to stay in contact with their doctor and or able to contact the hospital or police in case of an emergency (e.g. safety alarms systems).

Technology has also increased the amount of information flow and leisure activities of older people. Nowadays, the mobility of the older person is sustained by various means of transport such as buses, private cars, trains and mobility aids that have been developed over the years (e.g. rollators, stair lifts, wheelchairs, lifts, etc.).

Collectively, AGE acknowledges that information and communication technology (ICT) has provided society with opportunities in the area of mobility, assistive and medical technology and integrated "intelligent" systems (e.g. micro-nanotechnology and smart houses). For example, the development of assistive devices (e.g. hearing aids, bathroom technology, nursing beds, lifters, etc.) and medical technologies (e.g. medical interventions to replace or repair limbs, joints, organs, etc.) has had a key impact on the health and longevity of older people.

However, the development of technology challenges its users and this challenge is often greater for the older than the younger generation (Mollenkopf and Fozard, 2003).

### **What are the challenges of Technology in the EU for older people?**

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breaking down technical and legal obstacles which European citizens are often faced with. The Communication will also cover the regulatory framework governing telecommunications in the EU since July 2003. In this context the Commission will review the Universal Service Directive of 2002, which obliges telecommunications operators to provide a minimum package of services at a reasonable price to all users throughout the EU. The idea is to adopt a single approach in the EU on this issue. The Communication on e-Inclusion will thus propose improving universal service by including social and health care consideration in the information society.

<sup>4</sup> Cowan, D. and Turner-Smith, A. (1999) Aids to Daily Living are items used "in a wide range of daily activities such as personal care, housework and leisure activities. (...) For example, adapted cutlery, tap adapters, dressing aids. Many aids to daily living are available through the social services. However, the range and eligibility criteria are highly variable. <http://www.archive.officialdocuments.co.uk/document/cm41/4192/v2ap4.pdf>

**Acceptance & Awareness** – The lack of familiarity and self-confidence<sup>5</sup> with new technologies and services and the lack of available opportunities to try them are identified as common barriers to involvement in Information society for older people. Within the EU there are huge differences in health status, in income and education levels and also in the expectations of older people. Huge differences exist between and within countries, regions, gender and ethnicity<sup>6</sup> in terms of the awareness and opportunities that new technologies can provide for independent living. Older people need the encouragement and time to become accustomed to the ever-changing world of technology, a so called: “social functionality”. This would permit people of all ages to choose technology aids at the right time and without fear of discrimination<sup>7</sup>. It is of course important to continue research on new products and new technologies that will ease people’s lives, but it is also important to ask why the existing technologies are not used by older people and their families more. Awareness campaigns and training are needed to motivate, empower and enable older people to increase the sociability, their levels of digital literacy and enable them to continue to play an active role in society.

**Availability** - There are huge gaps between EU countries regarding the availability of technical equipment, ICT enabled services for integrated health and social care as well as for telecommunication services for older people. Electronic Products, devices and services must be available and provided regardless of geographical location. Updated and easily accessible information about, the cost and funding opportunities of ICT (applications and services) must be put in place<sup>8</sup>.

**Accessibility** -Technology applications and technological services must be designed to take into account the needs of older people and not on an assumption of the need. A Design for All approach (mainstreaming the needs of the widest population) to include the majority of people in society and to fight discrimination must be the way forward. This will help to lower what the World Health Organisation calls the “disability threshold”. It is also important to recognise that the development of technology to help people remain independent does not need to be complex but can and should be user friendly. This aspect is of extreme importance as older citizens, in particular the very old or the less well-off, have missed the opportunity to gain access to information society technologies during their working or educational life. The EU could promote more research for the development of standards<sup>9</sup> that would help designers and manufacturers to ensure the accessibility and user friendliness of new applications and services.

**Affordability** - If older people are to take advantage of information society then products and services must not only be available and accessible they must also be affordable. Costs are still a major barrier for many very old people, whose limited resources are insufficient to cover their increasing dependency needs. There are many actions that can be taken by public policy (through public financial support to help meet costs) and industry (through flexible and creative pricing strategies, mainstreaming and using the Design for All principle) to reduce these types of barriers. This is particularly

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<sup>5</sup> Older people tend to suffer from combined impairments, such as an impaired vision, and hearing, combined with frailty, loss of balance, loss of muscular strength, loss of fine motor skills which makes grabbing small objects or operating some devices difficult. These combined impairments often result in a loss of self-confidence and a reaction of avoidance, which makes older people more reluctant to try new devices or products. This is an important factor that should be taken into account in the development of assistive technologies.

<sup>6</sup> The gender and ethnicity aspects in terms of access to and awareness of these services are not very well documented and AGE calls for more research on the needs and preferences of older women and older migrants – who are, in the vast majority of cases, the carers (or future) carers of dependent people remaining at home.

<sup>7</sup> “It is because design for older and disabled people at home has to be based on want, not an assumption of need, that much research in Assistive Technology is currently aimed at exploring acceptance” of technology of older people(Cowan D. and Turner Smith, 1999, p-335).

<sup>8</sup> As Cowan and Turner-Smith (1999, p. 335) point out: “Information about assistive technology has traditionally been aimed at the professional rather than the [individual] user (e.g. Hamilton Index). It is this lack of user awareness which may account for the engineered rather than the designed appearance of some products.”

<sup>9</sup> The development of EU wide technology standards for applications and services can be of great help towards creating mass-market development and reducing costs. However, one must not forget that even though this has its advantages there are still differences according to the country, gender, ethnicity, expectations, etc. “So items produced for a mass European market still require modification for different preferences.” (Cowan and Turner-Smith 1999, p. 336).

important for older people, who have low incomes and are at risk of poverty (Zaidi et al 2006)

**Appropriateness** - It is important to analyse what is the suitability of the various ICT applications and services for older people. One of the ways to achieve this is through user involvement from the very beginning of the technological process i.e. from the problem definition and the design, to the development, and evaluation of the new applications and services. “The best designs emerge from an informed network of designer, consumer, manufacturer and provider” (Cowan and Turner-Smith, 1999, p. 337). After all, older people are “the experts on everyday life” (ibid.). However, technology can represent a paradoxical opportunity to both link and isolate people. On the one hand, technology can lead to more independence and new form of contact and participation, but it can also lead to increased social isolation. Isolation is clearly a key problem in old age and cannot be overlooked when developing new approaches to keep older people living at home for longer<sup>10</sup>.

**Option and Choice** - Another issue related to technology is the question of options and choices. For some people, the opportunity to access services electronically from home will be of great benefit and is likely to be enthusiastically adopted. For others, the preference may be to continue to go to local shops, banks, to a central workplace or educational care centre, where opportunities for social contacts and participation are provided. It is crucial that technological developments do not eliminate choices, and that options remain for people to do things in the ways they prefer.

**Ethicalness** - Finally, new technologies can also raise ethical questions. For instance: being constantly monitored by electronic devices and the processing and confidentiality of personal data these are important issues that need to be addressed.

But whatever the challenges and differences, all over Europe older people and their families are looking for ways to enhance independent living as much as possible, and to delay or avoid institutionalisation. Governments, as already mentioned, are also looking for ways to limit the costs of an ageing population on their social security systems and to improve overall competitiveness and productivity by upgrading the IT skills of older workers<sup>11</sup>.

AGE strongly believes that ICT can be used not only to help save on the costs of social policies but, most importantly, to promote independent living among older dependent people, to increase European competitiveness via favourable active ageing policies and help our ageing society become more inclusive, better adapted to the needs of all its citizens and more sustainable in the long term. This creates indeed a very conducive environment for the development of new technologies to respond to the emerging demands of an ageing population.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Muito obrigado pela vossa atenção.

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<sup>10</sup> For instance when the nurse is the only contact an older person has in her/his day, new caring technologies, which replace the nurse's visit, would not become preferred solutions unless they are accompanied by other measures to compensate for the resulting lack of human interaction. In other words, it may be cost efficient to replace the daily visit of a nurse by a web camera device linked to a medical centre but the older person should still receive the visit of a social worker or volunteer to keep some form of social contact with the outside world.

<sup>11</sup> Another area where ICT can make a difference is by helping to adapt the workplace to an ageing workforce. A lot can be done to improve working conditions and the workplace for all to prevent a premature ageing of the workforce and create a more pleasant work environment. A lot can be done to retain older workers and provide them with the necessary skills to remain active in the labour market. For example, in terms of ergonomics but also in respect of new working arrangements by facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life.

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