



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**TEN/154**  
**eGovernment services**

Brussels, 10 December 2003

## **OPINION**

of the European Economic and Social Committee  
on the

**Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on Interoperable  
Delivery of pan-European eGovernment Services to Public Administrations, Businesses  
and Citizens (IDABC)**

COM(2003) 406 final -2003/0147 (COD)

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On 17 July 2003, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 156 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on Interoperable Delivery of pan-European eGovernment Services to Public Administrations, Businesses and Citizens (IDABC)*  
(COM(2003) 406 final -2003/0147 (COD)).

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 24 November 2003. The rapporteur was **Mr Pezzini**.

At its 404th plenary session on 10 and 11 December 2003 (meeting of 10 December 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 116 votes to one with one abstention.

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Networking across borders, by making use of information technologies (IT), has become the key instrument for bringing public administrations together and supporting their cooperative efforts towards a modern, enlarged and secure Europe. Furthermore, studies conducted by the Commission consistently show that investments in this area boost the economy (with high rates of return). A Community initiative on the subject, "Interchange of Data between Administrations" (IDA), was launched by the Commission in 1993-1995 with IDA I (1995-1999). Between 1999 and 2004, €127 million of Community resources have been allocated for IDA II. Of these, around 60% have been used for sectoral projects of common interest (PCIs), and the remainder for horizontal measures aimed at ensuring interoperability and full accessibility of trans-European networks.

1.2 The interoperability of information systems, the sharing and re-use of information, and the joining-up of administrative processes are essential for the provision of high quality, interactive, user-centric eGovernment services. The IDA II Programme has been an effective support tool and has also given an important boost to the administration of the internal market, by facilitating the mobility of European citizens and businesses across borders.

1.3 The Committee has had several opportunities to express its opinion on the IDA programme, in April 1998<sup>1</sup> and, more recently, in January 2002<sup>2</sup>, emphasising among other things:

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 214, 10.7.1998, p. 33

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 80, 3.4.2002, p. 21

- the importance of strengthening the IDA programme, not only for the benefit of administrations and institutions, but also for that of the public, businesses and, more generally, of organised civil society in order to ensure better economic and social cohesion of the Union and boost European competitiveness, in keeping with the conclusions of the Lisbon and Stockholm summits;
- the importance of an effective EU certification authority, in order to secure adequate levels of security for access to and the exchange of information;
- the importance of securing maximum visibility, accessibility and interoperability for end users of the networks promoted through the IDA programme;
- the need to promote initiatives at various levels in order to ensure continuous training of users and to open up the above-mentioned network infrastructure for the purposes of continuous training;
- the need, given the sensitivity of the data being handled, to guarantee levels of network security by means of suitable safeguards and, where necessary, secure transmission protocols, both at the central and at the peripheral level.

1.4 The second phase of the programme, expiring on 31 December 2004, has been instrumental in achieving steady progress in cooperation between the European Commission and Member State public administrations, as well as between Community institutions.

1.4.1 An example of this is the **CIRCA** network infrastructure for the development of application services, based on a web environment and on open-source (LINUX) components, capable of providing on-line services in a virtual space. This network is used by more than 700 interest groups, including almost all the Directorates-General and departments of the Commission, using the "write once, use many times" principle, ensuring accessibility to a large number of users.

1.4.2 It is also worth noting the role of the **TESTA** trans-European network, which connects the administrations of the Union with those of the Member States, the European institutions (Commission, European Parliament, Council, Court of Justice, Court of Auditors, EESC, CoR), and the European Agencies, with a vast programme of expansion in the accession countries. TESTA is also used in the field of finance, in Justice and Home Affairs, in Agriculture and Fisheries, in transport and in regional policy. It also enables the management of import/export licences and the collection and distribution of statistical data (Datashop).

1.4.3 The **IDA Public Key Infrastructure** acts as a certification authority for servers and users, providing secure and interoperable authentication certificates.

1.4.4 By putting in place common formats on the basis of pilot schemes and the integration of existing services, such as SIMAP and TED-Tender Electronic Daily, IDA II has provided support

for a strategy for the development of a European system of **eProcurement**, as stated in the 2002 eEurope Action Plan and reaffirmed in the 2005 Action Plan.

1.4.5 **Common interest projects** (45) have been carried out in sectors such as the management of the single agricultural market, the fight against fraud, the pan-European database, telematic services for management of customs tariffs, taxes and quotas, customs checks and checks on freight transport, the EURES pan-European employment network, the single pan-European licensing network for the pharmaceutical sector (EUDRANET), the network for the transfer of pensions, maternity pay and unemployment benefit (TESS), the trans-European public health network for the prevention of contagious diseases (EUPHIN), the support network for the animal disease notification system (ADNS), the networks on the safety of chemical products and electrical appliances, the SOLVIT assistance network (application of Community law), the Ploteus network on e-learning opportunities, the telematic network for the fields of tourism, environment and consumer protection (TOURNET), which links European, national, regional and local administrations, the networks on migration policy, judicial co-operation (EUROJUST) and security.

## 2. **The Commission proposal**

2.1 The Commission now proposes to follow up this programme with a new one that will be different in both name and content, and yet will maintain basic continuity with the two previous programmes. The main thrust of the new 2005-2009 five-year programme **IDABC** (*Interoperable Delivery of pan-European eGovernment Services to Administrations, Businesses and Citizens*) is the delivery of pan-European eGovernment services, not only to public administrations at various levels, but also to the end users of the Community's internal market, i.e. to businesses and citizens. Putting this programme into practice could help to bring fully to fruition the rights guaranteed under the four fundamental freedoms<sup>3</sup> provided for in the Treaties in the whole of the newly enlarged European Union.

2.2 The new programme will comprise two strands, namely projects of common interest in support of sectoral policies and horizontal measures in support of interoperability. It is primarily about infrastructure services with procedures that are much simpler than those that have gone before, partly thanks to a single Decision on the two operating methods. The Committee had criticised the procedural complexity of the old programme, where two Decisions were required, and indeed called for a "single framework".<sup>4</sup>

2.3 The new characteristics of the Community programme reflect the need to raise the ranking among the primary objectives of the Union of initiatives in the field of eGovernment, which should be considered, in the Committee's opinion, as a means of giving citizens and businesses their

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<sup>3</sup> Free movement of persons, goods, services and capital

<sup>4</sup> OJ C 80, 3.4.2002, p. 21 (point 2.3)

full rights, obligations and opportunities in the forthcoming single market of 25 and, in the future, 28 states (to which the countries of the European Economic Area should be added). From this point of view of opportunity, the following should be considered:

- a strategic action plan that will work at a pan-European level and will converge towards a common telematic interface;
- easier access for businesses and citizens in order to ensure full participation in EU integration and in the Union's political and institutional future;
- total interoperability among sectors at various levels (pan-European, national, regional and local) and among the various types of users (public administrations, businesses and citizens);
- easier communications between Community institutions and their services at various levels, including the European agencies, in order to simplify and improve the decision-making process;
- better transparency, security, responsive capacity and service culture;
- implementation of unified, slimmed-down, rationalised, decentralised procedures and sharing of best practice;
- a close link with other Community initiatives and programmes such as eTEN, eContent, Modinis<sup>5</sup> and the relevant RTDD activities of the 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme.

2.4 The Commission's proposal assigns Community financial resources to the new **IDABC** amounting to €59.1 million for the period 2005-06 and €89.6 million are expected in the new financial perspectives for 2007-09. Over the five-year period, the new programme should be assigned a total of €148.7 million (compared to €145.6 million in 1999-2004). In the Committee's opinion, this does not appear to be in proportion with the newly-assigned tasks and objectives.

### 3. General comments

3.1 The Committee accepts the fundamental need expressed in the proposal to revamp the IDA programme and integrate it fully into the Lisbon strategy. The purpose of this, as is well known, is to ensure that by 2010 the European economy becomes the most dynamic and competitive in the world. It is connected with the eEurope 2005 action plan "An information society for all", which was launched at the European Council in Seville with the purpose of facilitating the

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<sup>5</sup> eTEN: Trans-European electronic telecommunications networks; eContent: Electronic databases; Modinis: Information network security

management of the single market and the cross-border mobility of citizens, businesses, goods, capital and services by delivering pan-European administrative services across interoperable networks.

3.2 The Committee supports the Proposal for a Decision to the extent that it reflects the lines laid down in the Ministerial Declaration adopted in Cernobbio on 8 July 2003 at the European Conference on eGovernment<sup>6</sup>. The purpose of this was to allow open dialogue between public administrations, businesses and citizens with the principal objectives of improving interoperability, introducing flexible and ever cheaper and more secure methods of information exchange, giving priority to services on the basis of analysis of business and public demand, and systematically checking the value for money for the end users and their level of satisfaction regarding pan-European service delivery.

3.3 The Committee believes that the revamped programme should treat "online administration" as an innovative way of reorganising the way public services work and are delivered to citizens and businesses. The objective is to create pan-European services that are clear, simple and user-friendly. However, a high level of legal certainty and tried and tested legal instruments will be needed in order to strengthen consumer and business confidence in online administration.

3.4 In the opinion of the Committee, particular attention must be given to the role of online administration in facilitating the full integration of new Member States into the big internal market of an enlarged Europe. This must be achieved in terms of effective freedom of movement and of establishment of people and businesses. The aim should be not only to guarantee administrative transparency, but also to reduce linguistic obstacles and judicial, bureaucratic and procedural uncertainties.

3.5 For these reasons, the Committee considers it to be of the utmost importance that the Commission should create coherent platforms for consulting the business world, in particular SMEs, as well as organised civil society and those decentralised administrations that are closest to the end users. This should be done both through special consultative committees and through periodic pan-European conferences on online services in order to ensure constant evaluation and adjustment of the IDABC programme in terms of value for money and business satisfaction.

3.6 In the opinion of the Committee, a serious deficiency of the new programme is that it does not provide for any information or training measures (in-service or online) either for providers, to help the spread of a new "*pan-European*" administrative culture of openness to the new reality of the enlarged internal market, or for intermediate and end users, who have the right to be fully informed about the services offered by the programme across the whole territory of the Union.

3.7 It would also be helpful if the Commission were to collect and distribute information on best practice among the systems of eGovernment used in different countries. Apart from anything

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.e-govconference2003.org/>

else, this could offer ideas and pointers for political decision-makers at different levels. An interactive eGovernment service could allow the public to be involved not only in the outcome but also in the course of an administrative procedure, following its progress in real time.

3.8 The EESC hopes that the Commission will advocate the adoption by all the EU's public administrations of the European-designed LINUX open-source system on a European level, and that it will also support a pan-European multilingual search engine geared to the needs of businesses and the public. There is also a need to guarantee access for all sections of the public, whatever access point they may be using.

#### 4. **Specific comments**

4.1 *Legal basis:* the Committee thinks that this should not be limited only to Article 156 of the EC Treaty, as happened in the past, but should include Articles 154 and 157, given the innovative set-up of IDABC.

4.2 *Budget:* the Committee considers the sums allocated to be limiting. In its opinion, these do not seem to respond fully to the scope of the new tasks, taking into account the forthcoming enlargement, relations with the countries of the European Economic Area, and the international cooperation under way with Mediterranean and Balkan countries (e.g. the EURES network, migratory flows, visas and asylum, security networks, etc).

4.3 *Priorities:* the Committee endorses the priorities listed in the proposal, which clearly highlight the considerable potential impact of the new initiative on businesses and citizens, but stresses that the new approach must be underpinned by procedures for involving their representatives. It believes that the construction of the programme, its direction in response to customer satisfaction, and its intermediate and final evaluation must result from jointly agreed procedures and criteria.

4.4 *Management Committee:* in the opinion of the Committee, Article 11 should specify that the Commission, as well as being assisted by the Telematics between Administrations Committee (TAC), may also draw on contributions from consultative committees involving end users and decentralised administrations. Clearly, public and private representatives will need a level of technical training that enables forward-looking consultations. These Committees' opinions should be taken into account in the procedure set out in Article 11 (2).

4.5 *Implementation procedure:* for each common interest project or horizontal measure, the action programme should also include, wherever appropriate, a new point (d) concerning ongoing training of providers and intermediate and end users as an integral part of the project or measure. In the Committee's opinion, every project should also explicitly provide for full compliance with the *WAI code* concerning web accessibility for elderly or disabled people.

4.6 *Annex I B* – Community Policies and Activities: the policies and activities covered by common interest projects should include technical standardisation and certification, as well as patent protection of intellectual and industrial property.

4.7 *Annex A III* – The social security and pensions sectors, as well as the systems for refunding VAT, should be included in the action programme.

## 5. **Conclusions**

5.1 The Committee firmly believes that interoperable pan-European public services are needed to improve the efficiency and productivity of public administrations, to make the European single market more competitive and easier to negotiate, and to promote transparency, participation in the democratic decision-making process and social inclusion, primarily in the interests of end users.

5.2 Segmentation of the market as a consequence of non-interoperable e-government systems could, in the Committee's opinion, have political, economic and social repercussions for the enlarged European Union of 25-28 Member States, its effective functioning, and its competitiveness in the global market.

5.3 The Committee therefore wholeheartedly supports the launch of the new IDABC programme, as this is consistent with and integral to the eEurope 2005 Action Plan and with the Community's eTEN, eContent, eLearning and eSafe schemes, as well as being in perfect synergy with the Sixth Community RTDD Framework Programme, with the security research programme, and with the programmes to support the use of open standards, of open source systems and of benchmarking of public administrations at various levels.

5.4 The Committee believes that the new IDABC programme should be an innovative means of reorganising and optimising, across common interoperable platforms, transparent and inclusive public services that are offered in clear and easily understandable terms, with simple procedures that are efficient in terms of time and cost, so as to improve the quality of life of the citizen and the competitiveness of European businesses.

5.5 The Committee therefore calls on the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission:

- to adjust the funding allocated to the IDABC, taking into account the new pan-European tasks entrusted to it and which will involve international cooperation;
- to establish a forum for the systematic consultation of businesses, especially SMEs, of organised civil society, and of representatives of the various tiers of devolved administration, by setting up appropriate regulatory consultative committees (of type A);



- to organise periodic pan-European conferences on online services, on the basis of programmes of benchmarking of administrations at different levels, in order to ensure constant evaluation and adjustment of the IDABC programme in terms of value for money and business satisfaction;
- to launch a robust information and training programme to promote a new pan-European administrative culture, for both service providers and users, with particular regard to public and private actors in the accession countries;
- to see that every new common interest project or horizontal measure automatically includes continuous (including on-line) training measures aimed at providers and intermediate and end users, as well as a clause specifying full compliance with the WAI<sup>7</sup> code, ensuring full access for all and preventing “digital exclusion”.

5.6 The EESC remains committed to promoting the spread of best practice in interoperable online administration and to monitoring it by organising meetings of businesses, workers, and the various parts of organised civil society that make up the economy and society as a whole.

Brussels, 10 December 2003.

The President  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

**Roger Briesch**

**Patrick Venturini**

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WAI: Simplified access platform for elderly and disabled people