EU Structural Funds and the Development of the Information Society in Greece

George Papaconstantinou*
Ministry of National Economy
Greece

The development of the Information Society (IS) is today creating new opportunities for economic prosperity and an improved quality of life in all countries. The information and communication technologies (ICTs) on which it is based constitute an essential tool for open and effective government and for improved competitiveness. They create new ways of work, new skills, and the need for continuous learning and adaptation of the education system. At the same time they allow for a better quality of life with the provision of improved health, transport and environmental services, and contribute to the promotion of cultural heritage.

To promote the IS in Greece in a cohesive and integrated way, a separate *Information Society Operational Programme* (ISOP) has been designed and will be funded in the context of the EU Structural Funds for Greece. The OPIS has an innovative and horizontal nature, bridging across various governmental services. It constitutes a group of integrated and supplementary actions in various areas of economic and social life, which will be able to act as a catalyst for the development of the IS in Greece.

However, the development of information society applications is not an end in itself. It can only succeed as part of a wider determination to achieve efficiency and modernity, an open society, and a better quality of life. It is essential for this reason that information society actions are fully integrated into the design and implementation of all aspects of development action and are not restricted to a specific funding priority.

Overall, the OPIS will mobilise about 2.8 billions of Euro during the next seven years. This represents a level of expenditure equivalent to that mobilised by the most ambitious regions in Northern Europe in the previous period. Even though it will be a challenge to spend such a large amount of resources well, it is certain that very determined efforts are needed to close the gap between Greece and the other EU countries concerning information society applications.

Expenditure on ICTs in Greece represents today about 4% of GDP in 1998, considerably above the 2.4% of GDP in 1992. Despite an increase of the order of 16% per year, expenditure on ICTs is still at the lowest level in the EU, where the average is about 6% of GDP. This low proportion is also evident in the use of PCs. According to recent figures only 12 out of every 100 people in Greece use a computer while the corresponding Community average was above 30%. Only 8-10% of the population in Greece now have access to the Internet but the number of users has doubled in the last two years

In recent years the range, quality and cost of telecommunications infrastructure and services in Greece have improved considerably. The proportion of digitalisation of the network has increased to 95% in urban centres and 74% for the country as a whole, while the quality of services is improving by leaps and bounds. Rapid completion of the liberalisation of the market will lead to substantial reductions of the average cost and to further improvements of the quality and range of services offered.

The contribution of ICTs to development depends both on the development of the ICT secctor, and on the spread of ICTs throughout the economy. The Greek economy is has a number of weak characteristics: a low level of diffusion of new technologies, a small proportion of trained personnel among the total workforce, , a capital market that provides insufficient finance for new investment initiatives, high non-labour costs and few examples of the development of new types of work, such as telework. At the same time, however, the development of new business initiatives focused on new technologies, research work at universities and a widespread acceptance of many new technologies by consumers are signs of a new dynamism.

The OPIS is aimed at overcoming some of the present weaknesses and acting as a catayst for the development of the IS in Greece. It is structured around four main priority areas.

The first concerns **education and culture** , where the aim is to create an educational system adapted to the digital age, characterised by greater use of new technologies in education, the networking of schools, universities and the educational community, well-trained teachers and students, as well as the development of digital educational content. This involves giving all Greek schools access to the Internet and multimedia resources, with adequate web –based support services, by end 2001, training and all teachers in the use of Internet and multimedia resources, as well as developing and disseminate tutorial multimedia material creating digital libraries connected to the appropriate networks, and establishing tele-education centres. In the field of culture, emphasis will be given to using IT and networks for the scientific and administrative documentation and management of Greek cultural heritage, the promotion of Greek culture using modern communications networks, and the support of new forms of cultural expression that use IT-based media.

The second priority area concerns **citizens and quality of life** issues. It is aimed at creating an open and effective government, offering better services to citizens and firms, in an environment of greater access to public information and transparency. This involves developing on-line applications as well as using ICTs to streamline and re-engineer procedures and communication within and between government departments, covering all of public administration and especially the fiscal and finance, social insurance, justice, regional development and emergency services areas. Priority will also be given to the use of ICTs in order to to set up and support geographical and environmental mapping and management information systems, linking central to regional and local government., to provide higher quality health and welfare services to all citizens and reform the management of the health sector and its budget, as well as in order to develop "intelligent transport" applications through the introduction of telematics applications in land, sea and air transport.

A third priority area concerns **the digital economy and employment.** The aim is to help the development of the "new economy" in Greece, through fostering the creation of new firms, the emergence of new sectors, and increased productivity and competitiveness throughout the economy, while creating an environment with increased employment opportunities and upgraded skills. In this context, the OPIS will *inter alia* promote the use of ICT applications by SMEs in order to increase their productivity and competitiveness, the development of e-commerce initiatives and *e*business practices, the development of partnerships between business and higher education and research establishments, relating to the development or business use of information society technology applications. In terms of human capital development, the OPIS will focus on the development of basic IT skills for the wider population as well as on helping to close the existing skills gap in the IST professions.

The final priority area concerns **communications**. The goal is the creation of an environment for the widespread provision of advanced telecommunication and audio-visual services at low cost in the context of a liberalised telecommunications market. This involves funding measures consolidating the liberalisation of the market such as equipment for managing the frequencies spectrum, measures for the development of local access networks infrastructure, where the relevant terms of reference reflect the localities needs, without technological preference, as well as broadband services for the public sector, special actions for elderly and disadvantaged persons, and demonstration projects for certain new technologies.

The management and implementation of the OPIS involve a number of agencies, and include a Managing Authority, with overall responsibility for the approval and monitoring of projects, an implementing organisation (the Information Society S.A.) created in order to assist government agencies and other institutions in implementing actions, and an IS Observatory of personalities and high level experts, which will be in charge, *inter alia,* of, importing the international state of the art, disseminating best practice methods, assisting the exchange of experiences, know-how and information, providing training tools, commanding and supervising benchmarking studies, and forecasting skill needs and skill gaps for information society applications.

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* Dr. George Papaconstantinou is Secretary for the Information Society at the Greek Ministry of National Economy. He can be reached at Ministry of National Economy, Nikis 5-7, GR 10180 Athens, Greece. E-mail: gpap@mnec.gr, Phone: +30-1-333-2000.