Reaping the full benefits of the digital dividend in Europe: a common approach to the use of the spectrum released by the digital switchover

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The Committee on Industry, Research and Energy adopted an own initiative report by Patrizia **TOIA** (ALDE, IT), in response to the Commission's communication entitled 'reaping the full benefits of the digital dividend in Europe: a common approach to the use of spectrum released by the digital switchover'.

The report recalls the **need for digital switchover** which, together with the development of new information and communication technologies and the digital dividend, will help to bridge the digital divide and contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon goals. It stresses that the immediacy of switchover in some Member States and the differences in national switchover plans require a response at Community level that can not wait until the reform directives enter into force (from the 'telecom' package).

MEPs support a **common and balanced approach** to the use of digital dividend, allowing both broadcasters to continue offering and expanding their services and electronic communications operators to use this resource to deploy new services. In all circumstances, the digital dividend should be allocated on a technology-neutral basis.

The report underlines that the main guiding principle in the allocation of the digital dividend should be to serve the general interest by ensuring the best social, cultural and economic value in terms of an enhanced and geographically wider offer of services, while also protecting the rights of current users of audiovisual media services and reflect cultural and linguistic diversity.

The report also underlines the contribution that the digital dividend can make to the provision of **enhanced interoperable social services** (such as e-government, e-health, e-vocational training and e-education to citizens), in particular those living in less favoured or isolated areas, such as **rural and less-developed areas and islands**. Member States should step up measures to enable **disabled and elderly users and users with special social needs** to make the most of the benefits provided by the digital dividend.

Member States are also encouraged to recognise the social, cultural and economic value of allowing unlicensed users access to the dividend, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises and the not-for-profit sector. This would increase the efficiency of spectrum use by concentrating such unlicensed uses in the currently unused frequencies (white spaces).

The committee urges the Member States to **release their digital dividends as quickly as possible**, allowing European citizens to benefit from the deployment of new, innovative and competitive services. Following a common methodology, Member States should develop national digital dividend strategies by the end of 2009.

MEPs consider that, in cases of auctions for the purpose of allocating frequencies, the Member States should adopt a common approach as regards the conditions and modalities of the auctions and the allocation of the generated resources. The Commission is called upon to present guidelines along those lines.

The report encourages Member States to work together and with the Commission to **identify common spectrum sub-bands of the digital dividend** for different application clusters that could be harmonised on a technology-neutral basis. In this context, it supports a coordinated approach at Community level, based on different clusters of the UHF spectrum for uni-directional and bi-directional services, taking into account the potential for harmful interference.

The Commission is called upon to undertake, in cooperation with the Member States, the appropriate technical, socio-economic and cost-benefit studies to determine the size and characteristics of the sub-bands that could be coordinated or harmonised at Community level. On the basis of these studies, the Commission should submit **a proposal to the European Parliament and the Council for better coordination measures at Community level** of the use of the digital dividend, in accordance with internationally agreed frequency plans.