Economic and social cohesion and information society

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Given the importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the extent to which the EU lags behind its competitors, particularly the US and Japan, there is a vital need for the EU to formulate a strategy for boosting its commitment to and achievements in ICT. This requires a comprehensive approach in which the different facets of the information society, including its effects on cohesion, are recognized. In its general comments the Committee thus welcomes the fact that the Commission advocates the establishment of a policy on the information society and it goes on to specifically examine how the need for cohesion is to be taken into account. The Committee does, however, take the view that the Commission fails to pay adequate attention to the problem of the extent to which the EU is lagging behind the US and Japan. The Committee argues that support should normally be limited to public investment and that there should be clear guidelines for how the money is used. The Committee also considers the concept of universal service, which is a crucial aspect of the information society. It calls upon the Commission to refine the concept of universal service and to explore how it can best be made more readily operational. The Committee believes that new opportunities have been provided for the regions; it is essential that the Commission sets out specific measures to enable these opportunities to be exploited, distinguishing between opportunities requiring expenditure, and those not requiring expenditure, whilst taking account of the cultural and social diversity of the regions of the EU. The Committee calls on the Commission to appraise the consequences for cohesion of anticipated developments in telecommunications and to put forward, in liaison with the economic and social partners, proposals for linking these developments to cohesion policies.