Economic and social cohesion and information society

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OBJECTIVE: this communication complements the Green Paper 'Living and Working in the information society - People first'. It seeks to present a series of initiatives so that all the regions of the Union, including the less-favoured ones, can benefit from the Information Society. SUBSTANCE: for the Commission, the first condition for active participation in the information society rests in the ease of access of institutions, companies and households whatever their location. Analysis of the statistical data available indicates that a large gap exists between the richest regions and the less favoured regions of the Union at the level of basic infrastructure provision, the cost and reliability of services and the availability of advanced services. In order to reduce the disparities and improve economic and social cohesion this communication recommends several measures in relation to regulatory activity, investment in infrastructures and stimulation of demand: 1) Member States must adapt their regulatory framework and in particular: - continue the current debate on the scope of universal service and on the concept of public access in the information society in order to achieve greater involvement of individuals, SMEs, community organizations, educational institutions, regions and local communities; - provide for early completion of the liberalisation process; - explore licensing regimes with a view to integrating coverage targets including less favoured regions; 2) It is recommended that Member States should: - give priority to the completion and upgrading of the telecom networks, identifying the link between investment and regional performance; - adopt a strategic and integrated approach to the information society in partnership with regional and local authorities; - establish public/private partnerships, where necessary, so as to involve the private sector; - launch a range of initiatives (including within the framework of the Structural Funds) in the areas of education, training and work organization; 3) For its part the Commission intends to: - develop further its policy on universal service in the context of its legislative initiative; - increase the coherence of its actions in particular in the relation between the 4th Framework Programme for RTD and the Structural Funds and ensure that the needs of users continue to be truly represented in the 5th Framework Programme for RTD; - prepare for Spring 1997 a communication describing the set of actions to be undertaken as a follow-up to the consultation and debate process on the Green Paper 'Living and working in the Information Society'; - grant technical assistance to Member States for promoting new ACTs, including electronic commerce, and increase the access of SMEs; - continuously support the actions of Member States in the framework of the Structural Funds.