

EUROMED SPECIAL FEATURE

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THE EUMEDIS PROGRAMME

The Euro-Mediterranean Information Society

Information and communication technologies (ICT) to-day form an essential feature of a competitive economy and an indispensable ingredient of any modern society. As early as 1995 the work programme agreed along with the Barcelona declaration provided for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation on ICT infrastructure (regional in particular) and setting up new services in priority areas. The work programme also provided for the implementation of pilot projects aimed at demonstrating the information society's concrete advantages.

In practical terms a regional programme called EUMEDIS (Euro-Mediterranean Information Society Initiative) was launched by the European Union in 1998 under the Barcelona Process' economic and financial chapter with a 45 million euro grant. In late September 2001 the MED Committee gave the green light to an additional funding of 20 million euro for EUMEDIS.

At the European Commission Michel Bosco is in charge of international co-operation within the IST Programme (Information Society Technologies). In this capacity he co-ordinates those EUMEDIS operations carried out by the Information Society Directorate General in support of the Directorates General responsible for the EU's external relations. Euromed Special Feature asked him to make a first assessment of the programme and to outline its perspectives.

Euromed Special Feature: In your opinion, what are EUMEDIS's main successes?

Michel Bosco: The positive developments we have noticed are threefold. First of all the Focal Points were set up. They have built an information exchange network. They were very active in the search for partners, at the time when consortia were contemplating putting forward pilot project proposals and were looking for expertise in third countries of the Mediterranean and in European countries. Focal points also engage in information dissemination as a number of them publish some quite interesting newsletters. In addition they act as an effective link with national authorities. Focal Points are an interface between the Commission on the one hand, and national authorities and ICT users in the Mediterranean Partners on the other.

The second point, even though less visible than the first, is that considerable work has

been devoted to preparing the interconnection of the research networks. We now have a letter of intent from each of the 12 Mediterranean Partners. The letters are based on a Memorandum which is the same for every Partner. Therefore they all agree to do some well-defined things. The fact that we have reached this consensus is something that, I think, the entire Euro-Mediterranean IT community can be proud of, given the political climate, because connecting networks of which many are state-controlled is much more subject to political ups and downs than mounting projects among private firms.

A third success is the number of responses to the call for pilot project proposals and the quality of the applications. Most of the experts who assessed the proposals (people used to examining the top of European ICT research) were happily surprised to find well-designed proposals with sufficient

EUROMED SPECIAL FEATURE

Issue No 26

15 November 2001

technological content for take-up projects. Those proposals could compare with take-up projects eligible under IST, where they are restricted to the European area. We received 175 proposals, 121 of them were evaluated having passed the eligibility check. Of those 121 technical evaluators selected 26 which we believe are worth financing. With 26 out of 121 we have a quality ratio equivalent to that of the European research programme.

The Interconnection Initiative has been affected in its modalities by the political situation in the Middle East. Can you explain how organisations in the Partners can link-up with existing European networks to ensure the interconnection of research centres?

It had been originally envisaged that the 12 Mediterranean Partners would form a consortium which would be responsible for the interconnection initiative. In the current political situation the formation of this consortium was not possible. The Commission is therefore about to sign a contract with DANTE, the non-profit making organisation which manages the European research network GEANT. As I mentioned earlier, each of the 12 Mediterranean Partners has signed a letter of intent with DANTE. DANTE will shortly commence work on the first phase of the interconnection initiative which will identify the entry points and determine the capacities required for each of the Partners. A call for tender will be launched between the international services providers who will provide the links between the Mediterranean Partners and the European research networks.

What about the 'technological gap' between the two sides of the Mediterranean, that EUMEDIS is supposed to reduce? How can EUMEDIS

benefit from the fact that some Mediterranean Partners are highly developed in ICT?

There is no such thing as 'one side' of the Mediterranean and 'the other side'. Our own side has known very diverse situations. Connection prices in France or Italy, for instance, have been rather different from those in Greece. Therefore you can't really talk about a Northern shore because the price situation obviously impacts on the capacity you can install and hence on effective use. On the Southern shore you also get a very heterogeneous situation. Malta for example has a large potential for co-operation in relation to its small size and population, but it is in a situation of monopoly for telecommunication services and prices offered for linking Malta with the Northern shore are disproportionately high. Conversely, Internet access in Turkey is generally less expensive than in Belgium. Israel has already been connected to the European network, and so has Cyprus, as they have both long been actively involved in the European Research Framework Programme. Cyprus has a very active academic population already involved in research projects. Therefore the interconnection has already been used (mainly for basic research). Israel is making use of the connection to the European network for more advanced research activities and sometimes also for industrial activities within the bounds of what is allowed by regulations on the use of this infrastructure. In all other Partners a smaller population has the access and the capacity to use the equipment and to be part of the effort made through the Internet and the networks. As soon as people get connected they do the same things, be it in Egypt, in Israel, in Turkey or in Morocco, in France or in Germany. We were also impressed by the presence of real regional

EUROMED SPECIAL FEATURE

Issue No 26

15 November 2001

consortia within the proposals that we received for pilot projects. Among those selected I think there are three consortia involving organisations from both Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Priority was to be given to projects involving all 12 Mediterranean Partners. With how many projects is that the case?

Projects were required to be as regional as possible and to involve as many Partners as possible. The idea of projects involving all 12 Partners was perhaps a little theoretical. What is sure is that two thirds of the best proposals involve more than eight Partners and only one or two of those proposals only involve 3 or 4 of them.

Can EUMEDIS change living conditions for the man in the street in the Partners?

This is about pilot projects and not development aid projects. We are not in the process of having computers installed in every school, be it in the Palestinian Territories or in Eastern Turkey. The pilot projects we are launching aim at demonstrating ways of using such tools as networks and computers of which the man in the street or many decision-makers in the Mediterranean Partners are up to now unaware. This is done out of the lab, in real life. There is an innovative aspect to EUMEDIS. We hope that in this way we can contribute to raising awareness with the general public and authorities in each country so that they can put those tools to use, because we are convinced that technology-related socio-economic activities contribute to the economic development of those countries that invest in them. This is why we talk about pilot projects. Those who avoid pitfalls will make things which can then be reproduced regionwide. This is what we expect. Not

the end product. On the other hand, network interconnection will change everyday life for researchers by enabling them to work with colleagues in other Mediterranean countries. Researchers involved in pilot projects will see a change in their lives because they will work in material and financial conditions similar to those in industrialized countries and this should go towards preventing a brain drain. EUMEDIS will therefore have a substantial impact on this relatively small population that it is important to keep in the Partners.

How can EUMEDIS impact on economic development and employment in the Partners? Can the EU's experience provide any clues?

Some economies the world over, in countries large and small, have been greatly changed by information technology. Think of India, Mauritius or even Costa Rica, which in a few years transformed an economy based 98% on agriculture and which now exports 100 to 200 million euro of software. Will any Mediterranean Partners take this opportunity? Some of them have the economic means to do it. Have they got the political will? In Morocco and Tunisia there is substantial sub-contracting, especially in French-language computer-assisted publications as French publishers contract out some publishing operations to Maghreb countries. This particular market is going to expand. Now what can EUMEDIS do? Well, the population affected by EUMEDIS has a strategic situation and a strategic role. Conclusions will be drawn in the medium term but with some projects such as setting up electronic commerce networks positive results may be expected without delay. Small textile businesses, for example, will be able to

EUROMED SPECIAL FEATURE

Issue No 26

15 November 2001

participate to their advantage. This will impact the industrial fabric, and not only in capital cities. There are however very few instruments to measure the force of this impact in any part of the world (Europe, the Mediterranean or the U.S.).

How much of the additional funding of 20 million euro will allow for supporting other pilot projects, on top of the 16 recently selected?

The additional 20 million on which the MED Committee has given a favourable opinion will be shared among EUMEDIS activities as they have initially been defined. A total of 14 million euro will be added to the budget under which we can fund good projects already evaluated. This can enable us to fund 24, 25 or even 26 projects. We got this additional money because we made clear that sums already available were not enough for all good projects to be funded. As for the timetable, pilot projects should be ready to start early next year (between January and March). The 6 remaining million will be shared among two main activities. Network interconnection will get 3 more million because when preparing the evaluation we realized that with the 7 million initially provided it would be unlikely to achieve the minimum services required. Lastly 3 more million will be awarded to focal points' operations as well as to information dissemination of the projects' results. Each project is already provided with a budget for disseminating results, but the Commission will also fund a wider regional dissemination of EUMEDIS' most striking results.

Has EUMEDIS contributed to improving mutual understanding between peoples and cultures around the Mediterranean and how?

I believe that what EUMEDIS can do today is at least as substantial as what we envisaged three or four years ago. I mean that all in all the political situation in recent years, with its ups and downs, has hardly altered regular meetings between the Commission and the focal points. People from the 12 Partners are taking part. But network interconnection too is going to be conducive to directly improving understanding between peoples. You must not forget that many researchers have studied in the same classrooms as their counterparts in other Partners. Those people stood for their doctorate together. If they are working on the same subject there is no objective reason why they should not feel like going on working together. If one of them believes the other has got the answer to a research question, he won't be able to ask him the question if he's not provided with the physical means of interconnection. This kind of situation happens every day and it will happen again with pilot projects, where all applications are beneficial, some from an economic point of view, others in the education or the health sectors. We also have projects in tourism and culture. When for instance a network for treating seriously burnt people is set up, it will comprise a Palestinian centre, an Israeli centre, and organizations in the other Partners. Together they will be able to arrange transferring seriously burnt people from one hospital to another or preparing treatments at a distance, that sort of thing, whatever the political climate. The populations concerned will also benefit from this co-operation. In a sense, I think the aims and 'beneficial potential' of EUMEDIS have always been the same: they are somehow more enduring than the political situation.