Speaking Note Marit RURAL development and eGovernment

AGRI seminar 10th February: "ICT and rural areas: building the knowledge society at grassroots level" . Workshop 3: ICT, eGovernment and the rural society

Relation between ICT and local area development:

- ICT is a crucial tool for local area development, especially in rural and/or sparsely populated areas. It helps allowing people to live and to work in rural areas and to ensuring public services. This is crucial for avoiding depopulation or lower quality of life.

- In addition, ICT can contribute to strengthening local democracy and the involvement of citizens in political decision making which in turn are important for local development.

- It can also help to modernise and restructure the public sector and to develop better and more effective services to citizens and businesses, which, again, impacts on local development.

- Many strategies focus on infrastructure because of the need for funding from EU structural funds. Often strategies, developed by experts and civil servants, taking THEIR needs as point of departure, more focus on back office of public administration. However, the most important aim of the strategies should be more and better services for citizens.

How can local development strategies help to increase the utilisation of ICT by rural population?

- The major problem is not the UPTAKE of ICT by rural population, but rather the AVAILABILITY.

  - Basic pre-condition for the utilisation of ICT by rural population is the availability of broadband access to reasonable prices.

  - This means that EU, national and local authorities together have to ensure that BB is available across all areas of Europe. The Commission has to make sure that national governments devote the necessary money (from EARDF and other funds) to roll-out of BB. From our experience we see that in many countries this is NOT (sufficiently) the case.

- Affordable prices: CEMR pleas for including BB into the universal service obligation which would make it easier to ensure affordable prices even in areas with market failure (i.e. especially in sparsely populated and remote areas)

- Local development strategies should include eCapacity building as well for civil servants as for the population. Local and regional authorities can and should support digital literacy initiatives, e.g. by providing public computers in libraries, by providing or supporting courses for interested citizens, in particular focused on groups that use ICT to a lesser extend (e.g. elderly, women)

- Supply side: In providing eGovernment services, local and regional authorities give strong incentives to citizens and businesses to use ICT

- Better and smarter use of broadband constitutes a major contribution in achieving prosperous and vital communities in rural areas and strengthening the social infrastructure and the well-being of its inhabitants. Therefore it is crucial that the focus of the future development is not only on the ICT infrastructure but also on the content of the services, e. g. on health and social services, and on the user aspects of the services provided.

How well are ICT needs incorporated into the local development strategies?

- There is no general answer to this question, it differs very, not only between countries, but even within regions.

- In an information society, a comprehensive local development strategy has, necessarily to encompass ICT. ICT is a tool to strengthen citizen dialogue, service quality and efficient administrations.

- Today, many local authorities have a local development strategy and a DLA, but both are not always integrated, which they should be.

- Many ICT-strategies focus on infrastructure because of the need for funding from EU structural funds. Often strategies, developed by experts and civil servants, taking THEIR needs as point of departure, more focus on back office of public administration. However, the most important aim of the strategies should be more and better services for citizens.CEMR has published a manual on implementing strategies for local and regional eGovernment which advices national associations of local and regional authorities on how to help their local authorities to establish DLA. This manual provides guidance to associations of local and regional authorities on how to assist municipalities and regions in developing strategic ICT plans with politically set goals. The manual describes necessary preconditions for effective administration and electronic services and examples of important focus areas for the deployment of ICT.

- The Basque example: Before the development of the Local Innovation Agenda (LIA) boosted by the Association of Basque Municipalities (EUDEL) and the Basque Government, the strategies were at times local, at times provincial and other times regional or state strategies. Although being a small country there was not a good coordination between the different government levels when defining ICT and e-government strategies. The LIA has come to try to unify efforts and provide a unified approach to the ICT and e-government needs. Now a special effort has to be made to spread the initiative to all of our municipalities.

What are the barriers for developing e-government? What progress has been achieved and what is still problematic?

- Material: access to BB, ICT equipment in municipalities and homes

- Lack of resources, both human and economic: The most important is financing, as rural areas are not so interesting for business or private sector.

- A bad example of barriers and support: The budget intended for broadband in the rural area finally used for agricultural support only..

- Cultural: eGovernment requires a fundamental change in the mindset of public authorities: citizens in the centre and as co-producers instead of a paternalistic local authority (Fear of change: we have been working OK up to now… why do we have to change?Sometimes ICTs and e-government issues are perceived as radical changes and not as complementary ways to provide services)

- organisational: these changed roles of public authority and citizens also implies changed organisational structures, which also are conditional upon new ways of providing services and interacting with other authorities, not just transposing current procedures into digital form

- Such cultural and organisational changes are difficult and take time, even if both the advantages and the necessity are at hand

- preconditions: strategic ICT management, systems architecture, interoperability and open standards, open source software, information security and protection of privacy

- The digital divide: a great population percentage in rural areas is not ICT skilled. So, many local politicians do not see the need to introduce ICTs or e-government in their municipalities because their inhabitants do not demand them.

- Another big problem is the lack of coordination between different government levels. Sometimes national government prepare strategies without consulting LRA. Then the worst case is when the local and regional government usually do not have enough money to support all the aims of national strategy. Therefore we need a multilevel governance approach, in which different government levels share decisions about common areas/fields.

- Some progress achieved: In the Basque country there is a Committee of Small Municipalities, including mainly rural municipalities, that has designed a Strategic Plan including ICT and e-administration issues

What is the role of local authorities for ensuring full coverage and ICT use?

- Local and regional authorities have a key role to play in the promotion and facilitation of roll-out of BB. One of the irreplaceable roles of local governments is the coordination of engineering works, which constitute up to 80 % of the total roll-out costs. LRA can coordinate better (in spatial and temporal terms) the works (e.g. road construction or repair, utilities installations, etc.). They can map existing ducts and other infrastructure, provide access to public ducts or even invest themselves in open ducts, in dark fibre or in networking infrastructure and passive and power grid systems.

- Local and regional authorities have an important role in promoting the public sector demand for broadband communication and addressing the needs of their underserved areas (part of their community planning or local development plans).

- As deployment of broadband is hampered by market failures in rural and remote areas, LRA may choose to initiate broadband infrastructure in areas where market players are not investing.

- National governments should establish special funding for promoting development of broadband physical infrastructure and carrier services in underserved areas. LRA should also be able to use the structural funds for this purpose.

- Quite often the local authority is the main economic actor in its area, which means that it can also be an important catalyst (electronic invoicing etc). As mentioned before, in providing eGovernment services, local and regional authorities give strong incentives to citizens and businesses to use ICT.