Pan-European eGovernment Services

IDABC

IPM

eGovernance is not only about modernising the way public administrations work, but also about making them more accessible, transparent and democratic. ICT can thus be used to bring citizens and businesses closer to their governments and allow them to express their views on the policies that affect them. The IDA(BC) Interactive Policy-Making (IPM) project does precisely this: it helps Member State administrations and EU institutions provide a listening ear and obtain insight into the reactions and opinions of citizens and enterprises in relation to EU policies. Policy-makers across Europe are then able to target concerns and assess the impact of existing policies.

In April 2001, the European Commission adopted a Communication on Interactive Policy-Making (IPM – C(2001)1014) which aimed to improve governance by using the Internet to collect and analyse reactions of citizens and enterprises across the European Union. This initiative is now used by the European Commission to evaluate existing EU policies and to facilitate open consultations on new initiatives.

What is IDA(BC) IPM?

IPM is an Internet-based instrument that enables EU institutions and administrations at local, regional and national level to collect feedback to shape new policies and to improve existing ones. Currently, legal experts in 194 European Information Centres (EIC), 13 European Consumer Centres (ECC) and 54 Citizens Signpost Services (CSS) use IPM tools. More than 18,000 cases, covering 28 different EU policy areas, have been collected, 100 online consultations have generated 45,000 reactions, and 20 European Commission Directorates-General have already launched or are preparing to launch consultations using the tool. Commission services are now able to find and analyse reported cases, as well as carry out in-depth studies within a specific area, to be used as additional source material for policy development or monitoring existing policies. In addition, some of the participating intermediaries such as the Euro Info Centres, have begun to use this feedback in their contacts with decision makers.

In 2005 Member States will be able to use these IPM tools to set up interactive consultations with the general public or with well-defined target groups, as well as to collect feedback from citizens, businesses or other target groups on specific issues or policy areas within their responsibility.

"To be a modern regulator, we need new ways of consulting stakeholders, for example through increased use of the Internet."

Erkki Liikanen, former Commissioner for Enterprise and Information Society.
The objective of the IPM initiative is to use modern technologies, particularly the Internet, to enable both Member State administrations and EU institutions to gain a better understanding of the opinions and needs of citizens and businesses. It is intended to assist policy development by allowing more rapid and targeted responses to emerging issues and problems, improving the assessment of the impact of policies (or the absence of them) and providing greater accountability to citizens.

How does IPM work?

IPM consists primarily of two Internet-based instruments:

The Feedback Mechanism helps to collect spontaneous and often encountered difficulties in the marketplace, using existing networks and contact points as intermediaries, in order to obtain continuous access to the experiences of citizens and businesses. About 300 intermediaries throughout the EU, such as the Euro Info Centres, European Consumer Centres and the Citizens Signpost Services, collect problematic cases occurring every day and record them in the Commission’s Feedback database. This database stores the information and allows the different Commission departments to search for specific cases in a detailed structured database on policy issues rapidly and efficiently. In this way the intermediaries act as a listening device that allows for a constant monitoring of the proper application of existing legislation and provide concrete input for new policy initiatives. The feedback mechanism is also used by the intermediaries themselves, such as Euro Info Centres working within the Chambers of Commerce or other host organisations, in their contacts with Member State administrations for local policy-making purposes.

The Online Consultation Mechanism allows for more rapid and structured collection of stakeholders’ reactions to new initiatives within a certain period. It enables the creation of online, structured questionnaires, which are answered on the Internet and from which views on particular policy-related issues can be obtained. In comparison to traditional consultations, an online consultation is both much easier to take part in and more useful. This is because it vastly reduces the amount of time spent gathering and analysing the results, by handling structured questions in an unlimited number of languages and delivering the output in the desired language. Administrations can therefore act on opinions and views much more quickly and effectively than before.

Both mechanisms consist of online questionnaires and databases that include multiple-choice and single-choice questions and free-text fields for more complex questions. Online consultation questionnaires may be accessible in all official languages of the European Union. The open consultations are always directed to stakeholders, either to a limited group of stakeholders (with a login and password) or to the general public. The feedback mechanism, on the other hand, is always filled in by selected intermediaries. The intermediaries encode cases reported by individuals into the feedback database and, as soon as the cases are submitted, they are automatically fed into an online database and available to Commission services.

IPM has built-in statistical and text search tools that make it possible to pick and choose fields that require analysis. The use of the mechanism by the Member States and the Commission can be independent or joint. If the data is collected independently, it remains under the responsibility of each party.

IPM has made much progress since its launch in 2001. It is currently being applied through the following projects:

- The ‘Your Voice in Europe’ web portal (http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice) offers a single access point to all European Commission public consultations. Citizens, businesses and all other stakeholders can use this portal to tell the Commission what they think about new policy initiatives. Users can participate in consultations to give their opinions on EU policies or take part in discussions on the main issues of the day with European Union leaders. Consultation results are made available online once a consultation is closed, thereby contributing to more transparency and accountability in the EU policy-making process. A section of the portal is also dedicated to ‘Your Experience’, where users are informed of expert networks that can provide help and advice on how to overcome problems experienced in the EU. These intermediaries thereby help the Commission to monitor - anonymously - how EU policies work in practice.

- The European Business Test Panel is a joint project between the European Commission, Eurostat and the Member States that aims to evaluate the impact of new proposals on business by a representative panel of EU businesses. The results are collected via the IPM online consultation mechanism, analysed by the European Commission and then discussed with Member States.

- SOLVIT facilitates the problem-solving process for a company or citizen. A link between the IPM Feedback Mechanism and SOLVIT has been implemented. The SOLVIT centres, which are located within the administrations of each Member State, provide an alternative to formal complaint procedures or legal action for citizens and businesses who encounter a problem in the exercise of their Internal Market rights in another Member State. This link will enable an IPM intermediary to transfer problematic cases reported by citizens on EU policy application directly to the appropriate SOLVIT centre in order to initiate the quickest possible solution to the problem encountered.

IDABC is also focusing on manners in which the IPM tools can be shared and exploited at national, regional and local levels. Customisable web applications will be developed for both the collection of spontaneous reactions from across the Member States or for consultations of stakeholders. In addition, a series of measures are foreseen to make the tools more accessible, including the maintenance of the existing applications, architectural redesign, the provision of support in the preparation and administration of questionnaires and the development of powerful tools for analysing the feedback received. IDABC is now working on the migration of the tools to open source in order to facilitate the use of IPM tools by Member State administrations.