

Webcast

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The presentations and the discussion addressed the question of how to guarantee participation on equal terms for people with disabilities in the Information Society. The Chairman cited paragraphs 15 to 19 in the Ministerial Declaration on enhancing eAccessibility and usability. The time had come to move from words to action, to implement existing legislation and even to make eAccessibility mandatory in public procurement.

Rodolfo Cattani of the European Disability Forum, representing 40m people with disabilities in the European Union, argued that accessibility to ICT products and services is a basic human right – and that its denial is discrimination of the kind that has been outlawed in many other aspects of Europe's policies. He was supported by Angela Garabagiu, who cited the Council of Europe's Social Charter and the Disability Action Plan 2006-2015, with its recommendations for democratic participation and full citizenship of persons with disabilities through inclusive new technologies. Ms Garabagiou welcomed the agreement reached by EU ministers of Economy and Finance on 5 May 2006 - to make the principle of non-discrimination and accessibility for disabled people a requirement for member states when using EU structural funds.

A speaker from the floor regretted that industrial players still hesitate to transform good intentions to concrete actions, arguing for a mandatory legal requirement for accessibility in all public procurement (which Daniela Battisti pointed out has applied in Italy since 2004). Speakers from industry were willing to see legislation set overall goals but, because technology continues to evolve, legislation should not to specify the technical means to achieve the goals.

In that case, a comprehensive framework for quality management systems will also be needed, including agreed methodologies for evaluation of accessibility. Judy Brewer noted that users want clear accountability for websites and services that over-state their compliance with WAI guidelines. Several speakers called for recognised certification systems, although there is as yet no consensus on whether certification should be voluntary and self-declared or mandatory and delivered by third parties. The new version of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines will have clearer specifications, testable propositions and, in some cases, test suites to indicate compliance. WAI's focus extends beyond accessible content in itself, embedding accessibility into authoring tools and user agents and addressing the interoperability between mainstream and assistive technologies.

Training is also an issue. Users need training to use the tools, and developers need training to understand the barriers to accessibility as well as to develop workable solutions to problems of accessibility. There is an ongoing need for awareness-raising among policy makers, the public, and designers – as well as

among those who make the decisions that dictate the priorities of designers working in the field

Then, there is the question of who will pay. Design for all approaches can strengthen demand and customer satisfaction across the board, but some user needs can only be met by specially developed assistive technologies. Speakers from the floor stressed that users cannot be expected to bear the burden of the additional costs of assistive technologies.

For those users who will remain dependent on assistive technologies, inclusion and accessibility will not be achieved without interoperability between assistive technology and mainstream ICT tools. A theme running through all the discussion was the question of standards. Global standards are needed. Industrial partners, many of whom work in a global marketplace, currently face different, and sometimes even incompatible, national regulations and standards.