MINUTES OF THE

1ST MEETING ON PUBLIC SECTOR INFORMATION PORTALS

LUXEMBOURG, 25 SEPTEMBER 2009

1. Welcome and objectives of the meeting

The Chairman, Mr Javier Hernández-Ros, Head of the Access to Information Unit, welcomed the participants to the meeting. Out of 27 participants, 17 came as representatives from the Member States' public sector administration, and the rest were speakers from the private sector, PSI (public sector information) experts, observers and Commission officials.

The agenda of the meeting was presented and participants were invited to give their comments on it. The first part of the meeting would focus on existing portals and portals underway in some Member States. The representative from the PSI Alliance, Mr. Rolf Nordqvist, would present the "reusers' wish list" for PSI portals. The second part of the meeting would address technological, financial and organisational challenges.

2. General presentations of existing and planned PSI portals in the Member States

a. Mr John Sheridan (OPSI, United Kingdom)

Mr Sheridan, OPSI, started his presentation by speaking about the www.data.gov project from the US, a single access point to the Government's federal data. The goal is to make the US Government more open and transparent, to contribute to the knowledge economy and to deliver better services to the citizens. Mr Sheridan signalled that the United Kingdom (UK) aims to follow the example of the US. The UK is also working on a Web portal which will be a single access point to the UK's government data.

The UK's Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has invited Sir Tim Berners-Lee, a British engineer and computer scientist and MIT professor credited with inventing the World Wide Web, to work with the UK Government to help them make data more accessible on the Web, building on the work of the Power of Information Task Force. Mr Sheridan argued that this has helped raise the case of the PSI re-use higher on the Government's agenda.

He thereafter presented the current projects on which OPSI is currently working. The idea is to have a single access point to Government data using semantic web technology standards (Semantic Web on Wikipedia) and the concept of linked data (RDFs technology). This enables the users to bring together multiple data sources quickly and easily. At the end of his presentation he briefly touched upon the UK's data portal which is at the moment under development.

Questions: As regards the future British PSI portal, who is going to publish data and add metadata to these data sets? The responsibility of publishing data sets and adding metadata associated to will be of the public sector bodies' "owners" of the data. The portal will represent the door to the data sets published by the public bodies.

b. *Ms Carmen Alvarez-Cienfuegos (DG for the Development of the Information Society, Spain)*

The representative from Spain, Ms Alvarez-Cienfuegos, presented the Aporta project (Reutilización de la información del Sector Público) and its Web portal. The Spanish Ministry for Industry, Trade and Tourism launched the project which is fully dedicated to the promotion of public sector information re-use. The goals of the project are to promote the culture of re-use in the public and private sector, to develop the PSI market in Spain and to facilitate information held by the Spanish Government and public bodies.

She continued by presenting the Aporta project Web portal which represents a meeting point for public sector, business and citizens interested in re-use. It offers basic information on re-use, legislation, best practises, etc. They are encouraging debate among the stakeholders through blogs, forums, and social networks and RSS services. The aim is that the portal becomes a reference for the PSI re-use and a repository of reusable data. They are using open-source tools, such as Liferay and Moodle. The team working on the project consists of 4 persons (1 project manager, 2 specialists in information technology and 1 specialist in Web applications).

After a successful first phase, the Ministry is considering to continue with the project by maintaining and improving the Web portal, raising awareness among stakeholders, updating the successful Aporta Re-use Guidebook, performing studies and communication activities in order to detect future challenges, etc.

Discussion: The idea of using open-source tools in the case of PSI portals was supported as cost efficient.

c. *Mr Gabriel Martin (Agence du patrimoine immatériel de l'Etat, France)*

Mr Martin, from the Agence du patrimoine immatériel de l'Etat, presented the activities for the future French PSI portal. He explained that it will be a business-to-business portal which means that transactions will be made between businesses (such as between a manufacturer and a wholesaler, or between a wholesaler and a retailer), while business-to-consumer describes activities of businesses serving end consumers with products and/or services.

The goal is to support PSI re-use by improving transparency, increasing private companies' knowledge about existing information and its re-use conditions, encouraging information enrichment by mixing data from different sources, enabling development of new products and services and to contribute to economic growth and job creation. The development of the PSI portal is not orientated only towards the creation of new products and services based on PSI but also towards the modernization of the public sector: better information sharing between the administrative departments and better promotion and management of existing public sector information.

An interdepartmental task force, supervised by a steering committee, is working at the moment on setting the objectives and portal outline, defining the main functionalities, re-users' needs, examining the technical and organizational issues, etc. He explained that they still have to find the responsible PSI representatives from each Ministry and relevant administrative departments, design a realistic tool that meets the real needs of re-users and information providers, work on the creation of a public sector information directory at the same time and always take into account existing portals.

In the first phase, the portal will contain only data from the state administration, while the local administration will provide data in a later phase. The portal will offer basic information on re-use, legislation, intranet services for content producers (sharing best practices and faced

issues), access to a description page of the available information and also to the downloadable data sets, search engine, and also other usual Web services, such as news, email alerting, FAQ, etc. Other potential services to consider would be online purchasing and payment.

The next steps towards the establishment of the French PSI portal will be: the selection of a functional analyst; the launch of a request for proposal to select the company in charge of the portal development; to define the funding system for the portal (development and exploitation phases); and to choose the public body that will operate the portal. It is envisaged to launch it by the beginning of 2011.

d. *Ms Caroline Poot (Agence pour la Simplification Administrative, Belgium)*

Ms Poot started her presentation by explaining that Belgium, as France, is also still in a conception phase regarding their PSI portal.

Belgium already has a catalogue of reusable information which includes description of data, links to the data sets, conditions for re-use, etc. However, before starting to work on the portal, they would like to collect the reusable data sets in an electronic register. At the moment they are working on an interface which will be used by the public sector bodies to help them feed the electronic register with the reusable data. Issues as to who will feed the reusable data sets into the electronic catalogue, what information will be made available for re-use, etc., still have to be discussed.

In the later phase they would upgrade the electronic register into the proper PSI portal using the open-source tools. The Belgium PSI portal will include asset lists of reusable data, information on PSI holders, conditions of re-use, etc.

3. Reusers' wish list

a. *Mr Rolf Nordqvist, Chairman of the PSI Alliance*

Mr Nordqvist introduced the PSI Alliance. The PSI Alliance was established in order to encourage the public sector to maintain a trading environment that is fair and equitable, in particular in relation to the licensing and re-use of PSI.

He continued by presenting the private sector's (reusers') wish list as concerns PSI portals. PSI portals should include asset lists of reusable data clearly stating who is its owner, standardised licences (which should be simple, digital and public), contact persons for PSI issues within the holder's organisation, a clear time limit for delivering reusable data and also information on independent PSI regulators and re-dress mechanisms in the case of disputes. He recommended the drafting of guidelines or recommendations from the European Commission, and/or the development of a “neutral” Market Observatory organisation on how to design PSI portals which would build on best practices.

He concluded by saying that there is still a strong need for change in the attitude of PSI holders (public sector), a need for networks or fora where PSI holders and re-users meet for mutual understanding and more "powerful" national.

Discussion: In the discussion following his presentation, Mr Nordqvist explained that private companies do not expect "perfect" or "added value" data. What private companies do expect is raw data to which they can add value for new products and services.

4. Financial and organisational challenges

a. *Mr Christopher Corbin (ePSIplatform, United Kingdom)*

Mr Corbin presented a perspective of a group of specialists who are neither PSI holders nor PSI reusers, he called them the "non-aligned".

He started his presentation by giving a definition of a PSI portal. A PSI portal is one that is dedicated to or has parts of a portal dedicated to the re-use of PSI. He continued by saying that the existing PSI portals differ from each other in their objectives, as well as in their organisational and technical approaches. There are, first of all, the static and dynamic ones, educational and informational ones. We have portals from both public and private sectors, professional associations, etc. He argued that whoever sets up a portal, the objective is to provide in one place all the relevant information about the PSI re-use – often referred to as "a one-stop-shop (a window) for information on the PSI re-use". It is of paramount importance that they are open and transparent, up-to-date and targeted to both public and private sector.

He then presented the portal of the ePSIplatform project which is financed by the European Commission. The European PSI Platform is an interactive one-stop shop which provides news about European PSI re-use developments, emerging good practices, etc. Users of the portal come from both within and outside Europe. Lately users from India and China have emerged. Challenges which they are facing are locating content, languages, cultural differences, content loss, growth and keeping their audience.

He then gave a vision on what he believes every PSI portal should contain (preferably built using the open-source tools): information on the legal framework; standardised licences; information on exclusive agreements; directory to PSI; Court cases; information on good practice and guidance; reports and statistics; and, meetings and events. The benefits of such portals are the low cost; their e-sustainability over time and their consistent interface with all parties.

He ended by stating that the benefits of implementing and maintaining a PSI portal far out weigh the costs. Technology, knowledge and expertise are present and should not be an issue. Communication is essential and must be maintained. The content is available at least for a basic PSI portal.

b. *Ms. Marta Garabuggio (Regione Piemonte) and Mr Andrea Muraca (Consorzio per il Sistema Informativo, Piemonte, Italy)*

Ms Garabuggio, from the Piemonte Region, briefly presented the region and the reasons for the efforts undertaken in the field of PSI re-use. Thereafter, Mr Muraca presented in more detail how the local administration makes PSI available for re-use.

He explained that nine years ago the regional government decided to connect the local public bodies through electronic means (intranet) for the reasons of data sharing and integration of public bodies' information systems. In this way they enabled the regional public bodies to consult each others' geographical, administrative and statistical data, legislation, multimedia, books, archives, etc. They set up the so called "Information Directory" which is the metadata catalogue of Piemonte’s information resources.

After they had learned about the PSI re-use activities in Europe, they simply transformed a part of the internal "Information Directory" into the public "PSI Asset Catalogue" and offered it on the internet for the purposes of re-use. He explained that each type of database has a licence attached to it.

In the future they would like to increase the number of datasets available for reuse , develop a proper PSI portal, technically improve their system and promote re-use activities locally and internationally.

Discussion: In the discussion which followed, the participants of the meeting agreed that licences present an obstacle to the private sector while trying to obtain the reusable data. Moreover, licences add work to public sector officials. It was agreed that a simple legal notice on the Website proved to be a better and simpler solution.

5. Technological challenges

a. *Ms Catherine Lippert (Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Denmark)*

The representative from Denmark, Ms Lippert, started her presentation by saying that technological challenges are not the issue as far as PSI portals and PSI re-use in general are concerned, but rather resistance from the public sector. The reasons for resistance are different, such as financial, fear of making mistakes and fear of changing today's practises/policies, and the most important reason is a lack of knowledge about advantages brought by the PSI re-use. The Danish Ministry of Science's strategy is not to try to change straight away the mentality of the public sector (which could bring even more resistance) but rather that of the private sector – in order to stimulate demand-driven change. The idea is to start enabling dialogue between the private and public sector, starting with groups from both sides who already understand the importance and the advantages of the PSI re-use and build on them.

They have several initiatives, one of which is a competition which will help them identify good examples of added value products and services based on PSI. The initiative is designed to attract attention and to educate the public sector about the opportunities and advantages of the PSI re-use. Another initiative is an innovation programme to support the private companies in reusing PSI. The third initiative is a kind of a "PSI desk" where interested parties can get general information on PSI re-use.

A year ago they launched a Website, a so called "social platform" for digitisation, a place for debate on digital resources and strategies. The data source catalogue part of the Website is only a few weeks old and includes a short description of the data and a link to the Website where users can actually find that data. She ended her presentation by saying that the aforementioned Website will be developed in the future to fulfill the role of a Danish PSI portal.

b. *Mr Stefano Bertolo (European Commission)*

Mr Bertolo explained that his Unit, INFSO/E2 deals among with, other things, semantic technologies. The European Commission is a major funder of research on semantic technologies. More than EUR 300 million from the FP6 and FP7 programmes has been given to finance projects dealing with this kind of technologies so far.

He continued by saying that a lot of today's PSI is produced in an artisanal way which makes it relatively expensive and difficult to maintain. He argued that common technology and standardisation would enable the production of PSI with lower costs. Moreover, the semantic technologies provide standardized = reusable information and knowledge components and, semantic technologies allow knowledge components to be published in networks and reasoned over by machines.

PSI portals and the reusable data should be presented in a simple, robust and scalable (integration of different data sources), intelligent (recognition of inconsistencies, differences, identities, links, etc.), reactive/proactive (what just happened that affects me; help the user to learn new things) and accountable (responsibilities) way.

He ended his presentation by saying that usability and/or value of PSI portals increases with publication by means of machine readable (semantic) standards supported by tools.

6. Conclusions of the meeting and next steps

The re-use of PSI is beneficial and in the interest of both public and private sector, helping the economy and job creation. PSI portals make re-use easier and more efficient.

We can draw a parallel between the PSI portals (existing and foreseen) presented in the meeting:

- The majority of them are built on open-source tools.
- They have published the re-use legislative framework.
- The reusable data is presented in the data catalogues and asset lists, or is directly available for download.
- The conditions for re-use are published in the form of the legal notices or licences.

The Commission will invite participants to reflect on whether further work ought to be carried out in this area, which could lead to the drafting of a "specifications"/checklist paper as guidance for those wishing to implement portals in the future.

It appears from the outcome of the meeting that technological, organisational and financial aspects of PSI portals do not represent a real issue. There is enough knowledge, technology and good practice available on which to build PSI portals. Open-source tools enable setting up a PSI portal with relatively low costs.

The major obstacle is the lack of the necessary political will and commitment from Member States for developing PSI portals.

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