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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**Final evaluation
of the results obtained in implementing the multiannual Community programme to
stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks
and to promote linguistic diversity in the information society (eContent)**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Communication concerns the final evaluation of the eContent programme 2001-2005, subject to a mid-term evaluation¹ in 2003 with a view to assessing its first two years of implementation. This final evaluation², covering the period 2003-2004, was carried out by a panel of 3 independent experts, supported by a team of professional evaluators from a company³ in charge of structuring and supporting the evaluation, collecting evidence and drafting the report. The evaluation was conducted from February to May 2006, in close collaboration with the Commission services concerned⁴.

2. BACKGROUND

The aim of the eContent programme (hereinafter referred to as “the Programme”), as specified in the Council Decision⁵, was to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote linguistic diversity in the information society. The programme ran for four years from 18 January 2001 with a budget of 100 million euro.

The Programme addressed three distinct Action Lines:

- (1) improving access to and expanding use of public sector information;
- (2) enhancing content production in a multilingual and multicultural environment;
- (3) increasing dynamism of the digital content market.

It was implemented through cost-shared projects selected on the basis of public calls for proposals.

¹ *Mid term evaluation of the eContent Programme: Final Report, June 2003, Technopolis Ltd., IDATE, PRISMA*, full report available at www.cordis.lu/econtent

² *Final Evaluation of the eContent Programme (2001-2005): Final Report, June 2006*, RAND Europe, http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/econtentplus/index_en.htm.

³ RAND Europe, contracted on the basis of a restricted call for tenders issued by DG Information Society in the autumn of 2005.

⁴ DG INFSO Units C3 and E6

⁵ OJ L 14, 18.1.2001, p.32

During the period 2003-2004, 64 projects were co-funded involving 404 organisations and covering 24 Member States plus Iceland, Norway and Bulgaria; Romania; Turkey. The total expenditure under the 2003 and 2004 budgets, including the funding of all cost-shared projects, the costs of evaluations, reviews and meetings was around 56 million euro.

3. EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The evaluation assessed the following issues: relevance of the programme's objectives, priorities and means of implementation, the effectiveness and impact of the programme, its efficiency and cost effectiveness, its utility and sustainability, causal links from resources used through to activities and presumed impacts (the intervention logic) and lessons to be learnt for possible future interventions of a similar type.

4. EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluators found that the programme was successfully implemented and the attribution of the grants and the management of the programme were in general transparent, efficient and satisfactory.

More specifically, the evaluators made the following four major findings:

Finding 1: Solid Performance of Basic Functions

At the level of activities and of results the performance of eContent was good: the Programme made real and substantial contributions to expanding the use of public sector information, and to multi-lingual and multi-cultural content production. Overall it was concluded that the programme produced beneficial results commensurate with its resources; that it was cost effective in the generation of its outputs and results, and that it stimulated activities that would either not otherwise have happened at all, or would only have occurred at a national level. The overall management of the programme was good, and processes were fair and transparent.

Finding 2: Adaptation to Rapid Change in the Sector

The exceptionally rapid development of the sector substantially affected the objectives of the programme: in particular, the original intention of 'kick-starting' certain classes of activity was achieved much more quickly than could initially have been anticipated. The programme responded well to this change of circumstance with a mid-term modification of its objectives (expressed as modification to its Action Lines) and the evaluators welcomed this response. That change in its turn produced a need, however, for a greater focus on the development of networking; community building and dissemination at programme level at a rather late stage in the programme's life cycle. The evaluators considered that the horizontal elements of the programme response to this need were of sufficient quality but not of sufficient quantity.

Finding 3: Programme Level Added Value

In respect of progress towards the programme's wider socio-economic objectives, there is a distinction between the evaluator's conclusions regarding eContent as a set of projects (where objectives in the three action lines are expected ultimately to be achieved) and conclusions about eContent as a synergistic whole (where the Panel found insufficient indication of the development of programme level synergies sufficient to create significant added value over and above the combined value of the individual projects). The evaluators considered that the value of networking between projects had not been sufficiently recognised and that dissemination and concertation activities at programme level had been insufficient. The relatively modest scale of eContent's intervention was thus not leveraged to the greatest possible extent.

Finding 4: Relationship with Current and Future Programmes

The programme was seen to have achieved good and effective penetration into the Accession countries; to have complemented the e-TEN initiative well and to have been well aligned with the eEurope Action Plan, although synergies with Structural Fund programme were not apparent to the evaluators. The evaluators considered that this offers useful and directly applicable lessons for the eContent Plus programme and to the CIP ICT Policy Support Programme (CIP-ICT). Lessons learned in this respect (e.g. concerning the particular requirements of community building, networking, dissemination and exploitation) have the potential to create mechanisms fostering a substantial contribution to the development of long-term sustainable socio-economic benefits foreseen in the Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMISSION COMMENTS

The above major findings give rise to the following recommendations for future programmes and comments by the Commission:

Recommendation 1: The evaluators recommended that future near-to-market programmes should devote a very much greater proportion of their resources to networking and concertation between projects and to dissemination of the exemplary elements of project activity that projects themselves may have no incentive to disseminate. It is also recommended that consideration be given to support for programme events and conferences.

Commission comments: *To foster networking between projects and better focus dissemination at programme level, Thematic Networks have been introduced on the main actions of the eContentplus programme. They serve as an instrument to bring together relevant stakeholders, expertise and facilities to support awareness-raising activities and the identification and development of opportunities for improving the availability of digital content and the co-ordination of projects funded under the programme.*

Recommendation 2: Two areas were identified where studies might usefully be undertaken for the benefit of future near-to-market programmes. More detailed understanding of the modalities of the diffusion and dissemination of results from near-to-market projects and programmes is needed in order to maximise programme-

level added value; and there is a need for the development of tools that would be useful in assessing movement towards achieving the long-term outcomes of near-to-market programmes.

Commission comments: *The Commission is planning to launch a number of studies in the framework of the follow-on programme eContentplus, e.g. on investment in the digitisation of cultural resources and the economic impact of the preservation of digital resources.*

Recommendation 3: It is further recommended that Programmes devote some resources to monitoring the long-term development of market outcomes as part of an ongoing engagement with the target sector (in this case, European eContent). This would facilitate evaluation; raise awareness of interventions and project outputs, and assist the “fine-tuning” essential in connection with rapidly evolving sectors.

Commission comments: *These recommendations are already addressed by the Commission through a number of activities: Data on the Information Market available in the public domain on the size and growth of the market are currently collected and structured.*

6. CONCLUSION

The Commission takes full note of the findings of the final evaluation of the programme and will take account of the recommendations in implementing the eContentplus programme and in planning a future follow-up programmes. Progress already made in the area mentioned by the recommendations will be reinforced.

The Commission considers that the eContent programme

- (1) has been successfully implemented ;
- (2) enhanced the role of digital content as a means to increase access to information by the citizens and to stimulate the economic and social development of European businesses ;
- (3) promoted rich and diverse digital content and services contributing to the creation of a single European information space and an Information Society for growth and employment.

**Final Evaluation of the eContent programme (2001-2005):
Final Report, June 2006, RAND Europe**

Executive Summary

Background

The eContent programme of 2001 to 2005 was one of a series of programmes developed in order to stimulate the growth and development of the digital content sector in Europe. Its core consideration was that European enterprises and European citizens should be enabled to access and to use high quality digital content of European origin in a manner appropriate to their needs. The wider context for the programme included the integration of the (then) candidate countries (many of which are now Member States of the European Community); and other evolving European policy objectives including particularly the Lisbon objectives.

Focus of the Final Evaluation

The programme's total budget of 100MEURO has been fully committed and its activity very largely completed, triggering the requirement for this *ex-post* Final Evaluation. An Interim Evaluation was undertaken in 2003 i.e. at about the mid-point of the programme, but this was too early to consider the contribution of the visible *results* and *outputs* of engaged projects to wider socio-economic *outcomes* established as the objectives of the programme. Such outcomes necessarily require time to develop (and indeed it is still too soon to expect them to be fully visible); a large part of this evaluation is accordingly concerned with the extent to which the programme, and the interventions within it, produced or were consonant with mechanisms capable of producing the required outcomes. Issues of dissemination and of exploitation and the relationships established between the programme and the sector in which it operated are central to consideration of these mechanisms.

The full report of the evaluation sets out its findings in detail. Key findings include the following:

Finding 1: Solid Performance of Basic Functions

At the level of activities and of results the performance of eContent was good: the Programme made real and substantial contributions to expanding the use of public sector information, and to multi-lingual and multi-cultural content production. Overall it was concluded that the programme produced beneficial results commensurate with its resources; that it was cost effective in the generation of its outputs and results, and that it stimulated activities that would either not otherwise have happened at all, or would only have occurred at a national level. The overall management of the programme was good, and processes were fair and transparent.

Finding 2: Adaptation to Rapid Change in the Sector

The exceptionally rapid development of the sector substantially affected the objectives of the programme: in particular, the original intention of 'kick-starting' certain classes of activity was achieved much more quickly than could initially have been anticipated. The programme responded well to this change of circumstance with a mid-term modification of its objectives (expressed as modification to its Action Lines) and the evaluators welcomed this response. That change in its turn produced a need, however, for a greater focus on the development of networking; community building and dissemination at programme level at a rather late stage

in the programme's life cycle. The evaluators considered that the horizontal elements of the programme response to this need were of sufficient quality but not of sufficient quantity.

Finding 3: Programme Level Added Value

In respect of progress towards the programme's wider socio-economic objectives, there is a distinction between the evaluator's conclusions regarding eContent as a set of projects (where objectives in the three action lines are expected ultimately to be achieved) and conclusions about eContent as a synergistic whole (where the Panel found insufficient indication of the development of programme level synergies sufficient to create significant added value over and above the combined value of the individual projects). The evaluators considered that the value of networking between projects had not been sufficiently recognised and that dissemination and concertation activities at programme level had been insufficient. The relatively modest scale of eContent's intervention was thus not leveraged to the greatest possible extent.

Finding 4: Relationship with Current and Future Programmes

The programme was seen to have achieved good and effective penetration into the Accession countries; to have complemented the e-TEN initiative well and to have been well aligned with the eEurope Action Plan, although synergies with Structural Fund programme were not apparent to the evaluators. The evaluators considered that this offers useful and directly applicable lessons for the eContent Plus programme and to the CIP ICT Policy Support Programme (CIP-ICT). Lessons learned in this respect (e.g. concerning the particular requirements of community building, networking, dissemination and exploitation) have the potential to create mechanisms fostering a substantial contribution to the development of long-term sustainable socio-economic benefits foreseen in the Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas.

Recommendations

The evaluators recommended that future near-to-market programmes should devote a very much greater proportion of their resources to networking and concertation between projects (for instance, to encourage the development and diffusion of new business models) and to dissemination of the exemplary elements of project activity that projects themselves may have no incentive to disseminate. It is also recommended that consideration be given to support for programme events and conferences, to the operation of a press office and for full involvement of all appropriate media particularly including search engine optimisation, viral marketing etc whilst still utilising trade and specialist press. Such horizontal activities are vital to the optimal development of the potential value of a programme and therefore should not be left hostage to the necessary uncertainties of the 'Call for Proposal' mechanism.

Two areas were identified where studies might usefully be undertaken for the benefit of future near-to-market programmes. More detailed understanding of the modalities of the diffusion and dissemination of results from near-to-market projects and programmes is needed in order to maximise programme-level added value; and there is a need for the development of tools (analogous to the citation analysis tools used in assessing the outcomes of RTD programmes) that would be useful in assessing movement towards achieving the long-term outcomes of near-to-market programmes.

It is further recommended that Programmes devote some resource to monitoring the long-term development of market outcomes as part of an ongoing engagement with the target sector (in this case, European eContent). This would facilitate evaluation; raise awareness of interventions and project outputs, and assist the “fine-tuning” essential in connection with rapidly evolving sectors.