# Online public administrations at the service of all Europeans

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**Did you know that a staggering 30% of Europeans are considered as being socially disadvantaged? These people are in danger of being excluded from society. At the same time, they make up the greatest number of public service users.**

**It is therefore essential to fully integrate them into our information society so that they have proper access to the services they are entitled to. This is where online public services (or "eGovernment") can be extremely useful.  Let me illustrate this with two real life examples.**

Imagine a situation where your country experiences a temporary shortage of Information Technology specialists and companies start attracting extra workforce from abroad. A young IT specialist from Spain or Hungary for example is drawn by the offer. His wife quits her job and the family moves to your country leaving their friends and habits in their home country. A year later, the same company decides to outsource its IT to another EU country. The man loses his job and struggles to earn a living for his wife and children.

Such situations can quickly turn into drama. EU expatriates who are not familiar with the culture and language of their new country, can start making inquiries and face never-ending queues in public offices to apply for unemployment benefits, social housing, health care and day care subsidies, reductions for public transport, etc... The local system and the labyrinths of public administrations can quickly become incomprehensible.

We all have to face up to the complexity of administrations at some point, but for some of us this becomes an insurmountable hurdle. Take the following example. A few years ago, the Belgian government decided to grant citizens living below the poverty threshold, a special reduction on their gas and electricity bills. The government found out later that around half of them failed to apply for it in spite of its efforts to inform them about their rights: people simply did not know how to use the social welfare system.

These problems have significant consequences for society, and tend to marginalise those who are already disadvantaged. Without the appropriate support, they might be dragged into a poverty spiral or become isolated. This could cost society much more in terms of social stability or health care for instance, than paying out the intended welfare benefits. The Belgian Crossroads Bank for Social Security has solved this problem by setting up an electronic system which automatically grants complementary benefits to

everyone entitled to them, including the tariff reductions for gas and electricity mentioned earlier but also reductions for public transport, telecommunications or social housing.

This example shows that Information and Communication technologies (ICT) are key in reducing administrative constraints on EU citizens. The implementation of new electronic systems allows citizens, whether from home or abroad, to deal with public administrations more effectively. This greatly enhances the mobility of workers around Europe and makes our lives easier: we all need to deal with the social security systems at different points in our life, and not always under the circumstances of our choice.

The use of ICT also contributes to reducing administrative costs, even if initial investments are high. The Belgian Crossroads Bank connects 3000 public, semi-public and private organisations from the social sector. Last year they recorded some 657 million electronic transactions. There's no doubt that this helped to save a huge amount of paperwork.

People now have to provide their personal data to the administration only once, which significantly reduces the administrative burden. Personal files are then made accessible to other organisations in the social security network, provided that this respects the right of individuals regarding their privacy. These efficiency gains should also enable the social security organisations to improve the quality of their service and ultimately the social cohesion of society.

The example of The Belgian Crossroads Bank, which won last year's European Public Service Award, is significant. It incorporated many of the concerns that motivate the European i2010 Action Plan on eGovernment – such as the efficiency in the way public administrations handle citizens' requests, as well as the need for user-friendly services delivered through the most appropriate channel – and which apply not only to social security systems but also to many other areas such as health, education or employment.

I could have given several other examples of good practice, as there are a lot of them in Europe. Many of them are presented on the European Commission's ePractice website (www.epractice.eu). The ePractice is a community website where all stakeholders can exchange information on Member States' best practices regarding eGovernment. Feel free join the ePractice community, it is there for you! It is one of the instruments that the European Commission and the Member States developed so that we do not miss the boat at a time when Europe is getting ready to enable people to fully engage in the information society, regardless of their social differences.

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