

Bridging the Digital Divide in Mountain Communities - the Mo.Di Project

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Abstract. *Many mountain communities are affected by the digital divide because the communication infrastructure far from the urban centres is lacking, from roads to the internet access. Lacks of computer skills further makes the use of online public services difficult. The Mo.Di project was aimed at developing a good practice for increasing awareness of the available online public services, improving the IT skills of the population, and developing a system for easier access to services. The final result of the project is a good practice model that facilitates the implementation of the EU's Lisbon Strategy in the remote mountain areas.*

Keywords. regional development, digital divide, Lisbon strategy, information society, INTERREG IIIC

1 Introduction

The quick development of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has produced a social division among those countries and regions producing the ICT technologies and those who are not. This division is often referred to as the "digital divide" [1]. Another definition [2] says the digital divide is the line that falls between those who have and can afford the latest in technological tools and those who have neither in our society. According to Mossberger et. al [2], the digital divide is reflected in access to services, technology skills, political participation, and economics.

This paper focuses on the digital divide present in the European Union between the groups of population in urban centres and the remote, mainly mountainous areas. Contrary to what one might think, the digital divide is not a social phenomenon present only in developing countries, it is a common phenomenon even in the most industrialized countries. The main difficulty in adopting the new technologies and the new digital services on a large scale is the lack of experience using digital technologies and being a part of the "computer culture". The digital divide keeps

several groups of people from reaping the benefits of ICT development, ranging from well paid jobs online public services such as e-government [3].

ICT and the internet may be becoming more accessible across the EU, and the number of internet users is rising. But according to 2007 data [4] the best performing, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have around one third of the population using broadband internet, while e.g. Bulgaria has a penetration rate of only six per cent. Improving access to broadband internet may be crucial for the success of e-government initiatives, since, as noted in Dugdale et al. 2005 [5], the biggest users of government services are the least likely to be connected to the internet.

In the EU, there are several initiatives directed at issues connected with the digital divide. The launch of the European strategy for the development of e-government was the "e-Europe 2002" initiative, presented in March 2000 at the Lisbon European Council and approved at the Council of Feira in June 2000. The main objective for e-government was that Member States should ensure "generalized electronic access to main basic public services by 2003". Before the end of "e-Europe 2002" effective period, the Commission presented the continuation of this initiative as the "e-Europe 2005" programme at the Seville European Council in June 2002. Concerning interactive public services the objective was that "the Member States should have ensured that basic public services are interactive, where relevant, accessible for all, and exploit both the potential of broadband networks and of multi-platform access" [6]. The most recent EU initiative trying to tackle the digital divide is e-Inclusion (<http://www.einclusion-eu.org>). The goal of e-Inclusion is taking full advantage of opportunities offered by new technologies to overcome social and economic disadvantages and exclusion.

On the other hand, the EU's INTERREG Initiative aims at stimulating interregional co-operation among the countries of the European Union, so that national borders do not put obstacles in the way of the EU

regions balanced development and integration [7]. It is designed to strengthen economic and social cohesion throughout the EU by fostering the balanced development of the continent through cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation. In particular, the INTERREG IIC initiative, within which the Mo.Di project has been developed, aims to improve the effectiveness of regional development policies and instruments through large-scale information exchange and sharing of experience (networks), particularly focusing on underdeveloped regions and those undergoing structural adjustment.

Within this framework, the Mo.Di project aims at carrying out actions of social communication and promoting the new ICT technologies to help overcome the digital divide. Another large part of the population which is affected by the exclusion dynamics of the digital divide is represented by the people living in isolated geographical areas, such as the mountain communities participating in the Mo.Di project. From this point of view, the advent of the digital era represents a very good opportunity for the mountain communities. The development of the information society implies a closer interaction between the public administration and the territory.

2 The Mo.Di project

Overall objective of the Mo.Di project is to develop a strategy based on innovative technological tools in order to reduce the handicaps related to isolation problems caused by living in mountain areas. Such a strategy is to be aimed at improving communication with centres of public life by increasing the services for citizens, which in turn is to narrow the gap between the administration and the zone, and by facilitating cultural exchanges between the populations of mountain communities. Mo.Di is a pilot project whose purpose is to demonstrate that isolation and underdevelopment phenomenon - typical of peripheral areas - can be overcome thanks to improved use of ICT. The relevance of results is enhanced by cooperative approach among different European countries.

The expected results of the Mo.Di project include improved interoperability of administration information systems in the zones in question, increase in demand for public services in the test zones and of public satisfaction with regard to administration services, increase in the number of citizens able to access the Internet, increased awareness of community policies supporting regional development, simplification of the administrative process and increase in inter-institutional dialogue, reduction of the digital divide and finally, diffusion of a new culture that considers the administration to be a supplier of on-demand public services in real time.

The project consortium includes the following partners: Associazione Tecla as the coordinator (Italy), Province of Modena (Italy), Province of Bergamo

(Italy), Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy), Diputación de Huesca (Spain), Business support centre of Kranj (BSC) and Business Incubator Foundation of Kalisz (Poland). The six partners studied a shared methodology to bridge the digital divide. Each partner selected three areas affected by the exclusion dynamics within its territory. BSC business support centre Kranj Ltd. selected the villages of Planina pod Golico (municipality of Jesenice), Lom pod Storžičem (municipality of Tržič) and Kropa (municipality of Radovljica). The activities on the project began in April 2004, while the pilot project ended in September 2006. The project is currently in the phase of dissemination and promotion of results and the insertion of new links to public services in the citizen's portal. The continuation of the project in the INTERREG IVC scheme has been proposed under the name of "Mo.Di 2".

3 Project implementation

All project activities were divided among the partners in a way to promote cooperation and teamwork. Also, a different leading partner was defined for each group of actions. The Mo.Di project comprises five Workpackages (leading partner in parentheses):

1. Coordination and Management (Associazione Tecla),
2. Study Activity (Province of Modena),
3. Pilot Project (Province of Trento),
4. Exchange of Experiences (Province of Bergamo) and
5. Information and Promotion (Associazione Tecla).

3.1 Component 1: Co-ordination and Management

The responsibilities and the obligations concerning the coordination of the partnership was entrusted to the Associazione Tecla. Coordination ensured that the activities of the project were carried out according to the implementation plan and the balance of dynamics among the partners. Each partner contributed to coordination by defining an administrative referring person who made sure the obligations were complied with and the coordinator's requests concerning communications were met with. The project management model was therefore centred upon the main partner, but involved other partners as well.

3.2 Component 2: Study Activity

Component 2 was entrusted to the Province of Modena. As it aimed at defining the conditions necessary to carry out the pilot project, it was one of the initial phases of the project. Its analysis concern mainly two fields: the services to be supplied

interactively, and the software architecture. The activities concerning the services started with a meeting among the partners. During the meeting, the characteristics of each administrative system were studied, and partners set out proposals for homogeneous intervention upon which the on-line supply of services was to be tested. Services had to be defined in compliance with the regulations already existing. Most of all, however, they had to meet the real needs of the people affected by the project, as well as the social, economical, and environmental needs of the territories affected by the pilot project.

In order to meet the real needs of the mountain areas, each partner had to carry out a survey within its territory. The survey affected the local population, and was supported by a specific questionnaire devised to collect specific data. The phase concerning the software was carried out with the support of a questionnaire so as to calibrate the architecture of the system on the basis of the characteristics of the services chosen, the ways of supplying such services, and the level of ICT diffusion among the population involved. The study of the system architecture included a starting phase in which the execution of the project was set out. It comprised the following:

- Evaluation of the functions and of the functionality,
- Analysis of the interoperability of the information systems of the institutions involved in the project,
- Study of the possibilities within the legal systems of partner countries,
- User interface design,
- Definition of the non-administrative contents,
- Creation of the portal (portal for the partners and the citizens portal),
- Data mining.

The field survey was carried out in July 2005 in eighteen mountain communities with an average of 420 inhabitants each. The total number of surveys gathered is 1584, which represents over 20% of the total population of communities participating in the project. The average age of the people interviewed in all communities was 38,97 years.

Table 1 presents the surveyed population in each of the partner's countries and provinces.

Table 1. Number of questionnaires by country and province

Country	Completed questionnaires
Poland	353
Slovenia	315
Spain	239
Italy (Province of Trento)	294
Italy (Province of Modena)	203
Italy (Province of Bergamo)	180
TOTAL	1584

The average academic qualification (in all the communities), was between ISCED (for International Standard Classification of Education) 2 and 3. Level 2 is lower secondary education/compulsory education where the first stage begins at the age of 11 or 12 and lasts about three years, while level 3 is the upper secondary general education which begins at the age of 14 or 15 and also lasts about three years. This means that many of the surveyed citizens have completed only the compulsory primary education.

The next table (Table 2) presents the use of computers in the communities. We tried to identify the extent of the digital divide using these questions. It is obvious there is an overlap between the "never used a PC" and "not using a PC regularly" values as the "non-users" also replied they do not use a PC regularly. We have added the last column (percentage of population in the EU and NMS (New Member States) that has never used a PC) for comparison.

Table 2. The use of personal computers in surveyed population and the EU

Mo.Di Partner States	Never used a PC (2005)	Not using a PC regularly (2005)	Never used a PC in NMS and EU (2001-2003)
Spain	40%	66%	58,6%
Slovenia	38%	60%	78,7%
Italy	56%	72%	58,6%
Poland	46%	71%	78,7%

The percentage of people who have never used a PC is lower in Slovenia and Spain than in Italy or Poland, but the related value non-regular users (66% for Spain and 60% for Slovenia) is still very high. Comparing data with the related values for EU and NMS of 2001-2003, we can see there has been an improvement in computer literacy.

Computer and internet access are insufficient without the skill to use the technology. The pilot project (establishing the internet points) included

introductory computer courses for the population, and in order to select the correct level and length of the courses we have also gathered a subjective evaluation of computer skills of the individuals and their use of the internet. As many remote areas have poor telco (telecommunications) infrastructure we have also enquired about the possibilities of internet connections with the local telco operators.

Figure 1 shows that the largest group of people hasn't used a computer before, and only about four percent of the people view themselves as computer "experts". The average subjectively assessed level of computer skill varied between 1,5 (Poland) and 1,68 (Slovenia), which could be interpreted that there are stronger similarities between the communities than one may conclude by comparing the countries in terms of economic development or broadband availability.

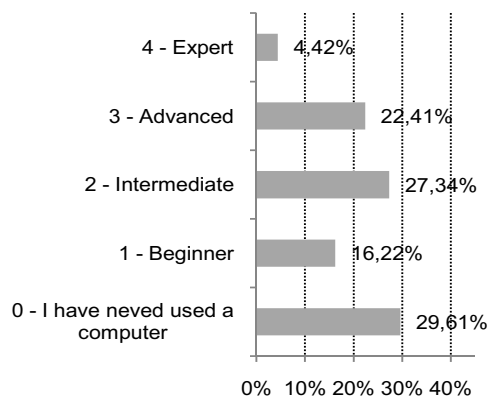


Figure 1. Level of PC skills (subjective assessment) in all of the communities in 2005

The survey also focused on the usage of internet in the communities. We tried to establish how often the people use the internet and what they do online.

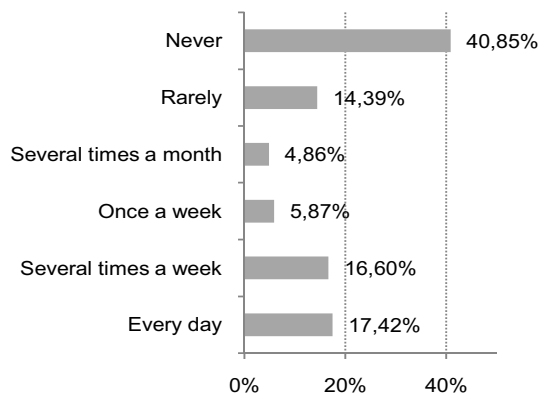


Figure 2. Frequency of internet use in the communities

The data shown in Figure 2 indicated that a large part of the population (over 40%) never uses the internet, which is a lot, especially regarding the relatively low average age of population in the survey (38,97 years). On the other hand, about 45% of the population use the internet at least several times a month. They use the internet mostly to surf websites relevant to their hobbies or work and read the news (about 40%), about 20% use the internet mostly to look at music, sports and games pages (presumably these are the young people), while about 10% of the population use job hunting sites and public administration sites.

The number for public administration sites (12,81%) was especially low and proved that there is much room for improvement in offering online public services to remote areas, and much potential for the Mo.Di project.

The next item we were interested in is the level of electronic interaction between the population and the public administration. Figure 3 shows that the level of interaction is highest in Spain, where about a quarter of participants have sent an email to the public administration at least once, while in Italy, Poland and Slovenia the figure is less than half of Spain's. In total (data for all participants) only 13,45% of the population have interacted with the public administration by email. We could speculate about the reason for the low figures. This could be due to mistrust towards the public administration or the fact that people are not familiar with e-mail.

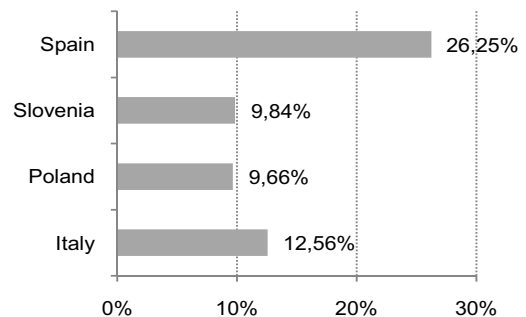


Figure 3. People that sent an email to the public administration at least once

The response of the public administration was also a question we were interested in. We found that of those 13,45% that did send an email to the administration, nearly all (86,85%) received a reply, with the lowest rate of response in Slovenia (74,19%) and highest in Poland (94,12%).

The subjects of emails are shown on Figure 4. These were the main different categories of services provided on line by public and private players to citizens identified. Data shows that people have most often sent an information request (46,01%), then request for documentation (19,25%). This is evidence

that people needed more information from their administrations.

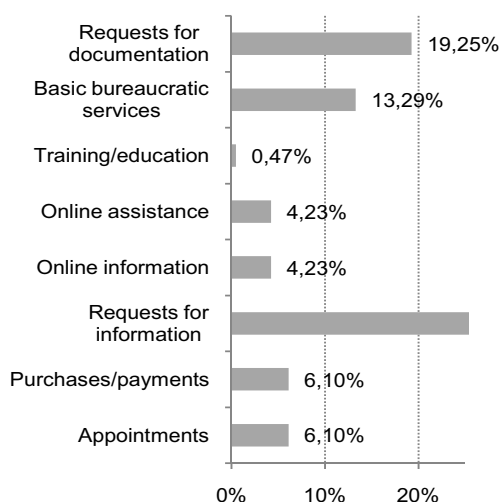


Figure 4. Subjects of citizen's emails to the public administration

A very important issue in remote areas is the accessibility of public services. We found that while the participants in Italy in Spain mostly answered that the public services are near or easy to reach, while all of the participants in Slovenia answered that the services are hard to reach due to poor public transport, and about a third of Polish participants replied the services are either too far or the public transport is poor.

3.3 Component 3: Pilot Project

Component 3, whose responsible partner was the Province of Trento, was the focal point of the project and was aimed at assessing the actual usefulness of the services defined by Component 2 for the population of the mountain areas chosen for the pilot project. The pilot project comprised:

- Training of the operators,
- Installing of the internet points at selected locations and supplying of material and services,
- Collection and elaboration of the information,
- Creation of an interregional protocol for the computerization of the services and the creation of a network of the mountain communities.
- Survey of Mo.Di portal users

In order to ensure that the project was carried out properly, a preliminary training activity was needed for the tutors of the various locations (each location was expected to have two tutors). First of all, the tutors had to be selected and trained. Particularly, tutors were provided with general knowledge on the issues of the European Union which were at the basis

of the project, as well the objectives of the Mo.Di project, and on the task they were expected to carry out. Such notions are extremely important and allow the subjects to work as correctly as possible in compliance with the guidelines set out by the promoters of the project. The instrument chosen to carry out such programme was a Distance Learning platform specifically devised for this project. Once the tutors have been selected and trained, the activities necessary for the experimentation of the service were completed. Each partner then provided a Phase Referring Person who supervised the functioning of the locations covered by the partner; ensured the efficient operation of these locations; coordinate the monitoring activities and the data processing. The real experimentation started with the installation and the configuration of the internet points on locations, and with the implementation of local workshops to supply information to the public (see Component 5). In order to make access for home users easier, the partner had to provide remote assistance by telephone or email. The tutors carried out the monitoring activity along with the Phase Referring Persons. However, the Scientific Committee was responsible for the processing of the information collected. On the basis of reports the Phase Referring Persons prepared every three months, the experts were provided with enough material to write an analysis report and a list of further services to be supplied through interactive instruments. Such list was part of a protocol common to all the partners who are now in the process of publishing further functionalities, content, and services on line.

In the online survey conducted on the Mo.Di portal at the end of Component 3 in September 2006 we have measured the effects of the Mo.Di project and compared them with the results of the field survey in July 2005. While the field survey targeted the entire population and included 1584 participants, the online portal survey targeted only the portal users, and a total of 223 responses were gathered. A second field survey was unfortunately financially unfeasible. The two sets of data obviously do not belong to a homogeneous sample, and cannot be statistically compared. Still, the data indicated the results of the Mo.Di project.

The average age of participants was 32,87 years, giving a 6 year younger population than the population in the field survey.

Comparing the computer skills of the participants (again subjectively assessed) as shown in Figure 5, we can see that there are more beginners than before (23,77% September 2006 and 16,22% in April 2005). This shows that a part of the previously computer illiterate population was motivated by the project and trained by the tutors and the local facilitators. Their specific task was indeed the involvement of mountain people in the project activities and the use of the Mo.Di portal and the internet points, and to provide encouragement and support to create a first contact with ICT.

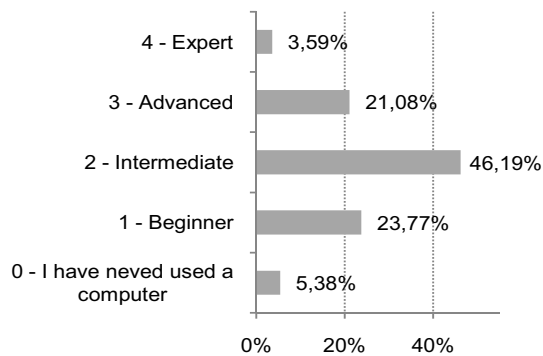


Figure 5. Level of PC skills (subjective assessment) in all of the communities in 2006

Also, the percentage of people who answered “I have never used a computer” fell from 29,61% in 2005 to 5,38% in 2006. As the percentage of beginners and intermediate users rose for a similar percentage (about 25%), we feel this is probably a result of the project activities.

We have also asked the citizens for their opinions about the internet points, and found that the majority (73,54%) of responding agreed that they “feel more confident about using the internet now that there is a free and always available internet point”.

The Mo.Di portal was also a subject of several questions, and the most relevant for the development of public services was the question “For which purpose do you use the Mo.Di website?”. The users at the internet points were asked to access all services through the Mo.Di portal, so that their choices/selection of services could be recorded and analysed. Responses are shown in Figure 6.

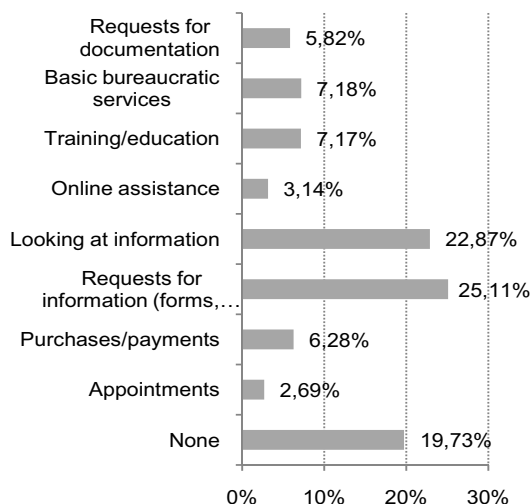


Figure 6. Services used via the Mo.Di portal

We can see that the level of interaction between citizens and public administration and other public

services was low. Only 6,28% of users were conducting payments or purchases online, and only 7,18% were using the bureaucratic (administration) services, and the Mo.Di portal was used mostly to either find or ask for information on public services.

The final question we would like to present within this paper is perhaps the most relevant to public administrations planning the development of their online services. As Figure 7 shows, more than half of the participants believe that the distance between them and the public administration can be reduced by online services, however over a quarter of participants found that the services they want are not provided online, and they still have to go to the nearest public administration office to get the service they need. This indicates that some services that are important to the residents of remote areas should be implemented online, or perhaps provided by field teams from public administration, where an online service is not possible or not practical.

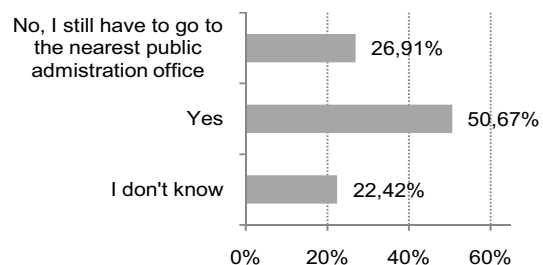


Figure 7. User satisfaction with public administration services in remote areas

3.4 Component 4: Exchange of Experiences

Component 4 was entrusted to the Province of Bergamo and was aimed at promoting the use of ICT by citizens. At first, citizens of the mountain communities are allowed to experiment with virtual interaction with other communities. The actual exchange of experiences was introduced on a second time. This component covers a period of 15 months, and starts with the constitution, within each area, of a group of 10 to 15 citizens of different ages and social background. Members of each group met several times a month to discuss issues related to the promotion of the territory and the reduction of marginalization and isolation. Citizens were asked to discuss the quality of public services and on the computerization processes allowing for a closer interaction of the public Administration with the territory. Proper functioning of the community system was entrusted to Local Facilitators who supervised not only the meetings and the exchange of cultural contents, but also the approach of the citizens to the technological instruments. Furthermore, two members of each community travelled abroad to participate in a physical exchange of their experiences. For five days, they visited another mountain community

participating in the project and were able to get a close view of the traditions and the culture of the place. Most of all, they witnessed different instruments and procedures used in the relationship between the administration and the citizens of the other countries involved in the project. Bringing back new ideas and proposals to their community was the result of the exchange of experiences, thus allowing the populations involved in the project to experiment with the chances offered by interregional co-operation. This will contribute to reducing the situations of marginality and isolation which is a characteristic of mountain areas.

3.5 Component 5: Information and Promotion

The activities relating to the information are extremely important in attaining good results. In fact, with no specific promotion showing the characteristics of the project, the services supplied through innovative instruments are likely to be disregarded by the citizens. The information activity was extremely important also because due to the digital divide experienced by many mountain areas, it is important to fight and overcome the disinterest of people in ICT. On the basis of its previous experience in the field, the promoters of the project have therefore entrusted the Associazione Tecla with the management of a complex promotion strategy. However, each partner retains its direct responsibility for the initiatives being carried out on its territory. The following activities fall within the field of the general promoting activities:

- Creation of the logo of the project and of a shared graphic layout,
- Creation of the material for the promotion, e.g. leaflets, brochures, etc.,
- Creation of the newsletter to be sent to the partners every two months,
- Management and updating of the non-service contents of the portal, and
- Final conference and meeting open to the public.
- Local measures, to be taken by each partner are:
- Workshops to present the project to local and national public,
- Setting up of information points in the venues of the institutions involved in the project, and
- Distribution of information material in the different locations and in the other main meeting places.

4 Achieved results

Mo.Di is an innovative project setting a best practice at the European level. The project has allowed an active cooperation amongst various countries of the

European Union. This has allowed the implementation of a common methodology for:

- The sharing of common objectives and information,
- The analysis of the on-line services issued by public administrations and of the technologies used,
- The analysis of needs of public services by the Mountain populations that participate to the project,
- The Implementation of a common methodology of services issued via a common multilingual platform,
- Improving digital literacy of mountain population via the installation of public, assisted internet points and
- Stimulation of the mutual understanding and communication of the local population through meetings and sharing of common experiences.

On the Mo.Di web platform and through transnational cooperation and thanks to the European funding, the partners decided to experiment a common and innovative shared model of supplying public services to their citizens and to involve them in a physical and virtual exchange of experiences in order to encourage a debate among the citizens participating in the project, on the quality of on line public services and to exchange best practices.

The various steps of the project, such as the analysis of the initial needs of the residents, the exchange of experiences, through the final phase of definition and use of the internet points (which have all been provided according to common standards in all participant countries) have actually been defined by the citizens themselves, assisted by tutors and by local facilitators. This has allowed the creation of a common platform of knowledge and objectives. All participants have come into contact with European issues, and that has further enhanced the sense of belonging to a wider European community, despite their physical distance.

The partners of the project have undertaken a significant activity of information at local level, by organising workshops and involving the local media. This has removed the local citizens from their insulated daily routines and has provided new and exciting stimulation. It has further enhanced the international debate on innovation of administrative processes and on the specific needs of the local areas. The pilot project has enabled different populations to reach common objectives while retaining their individual characteristics.

Moreover, the different members have been given the opportunity to share their own experiences and opinions and to organize the so called “physical” exchange of experiences. In fact, every facilitator has selected some “key actors” among citizens in the local communities, who had the real opportunity to stay a

few days and visit some of the communities of partner countries in order to see different cultural traditions and above all to have a careful look at different instruments and realities as regards the relationship between citizens and local public Administrations, and consequently to bring back new proposals and ideas for their own communities.

Throughout the project, the Mo.Di portal was being perfected according to the needs of citizens, and new links to interesting services were being added. In this way, the portal became a model, that can be used by the public administration throughout Europe to simplify the citizens access to their public services.

Finally, the most tangible and immediate result for the local communities participating in the project, in each of the eighteen communities, over 60 locals were trained to use ICT and the available online public services, and their community has gained a publicly accessible internet point with a computer, broadband internet, printer and scanner, that is operated by tutors trained to help the users.

5 Lessons learned

One of the key points of value generation of the project is the actual involvement of the local population in the definition of the project itself, as an active participant to it, rather than a passive subject of an experiment as often is the case. The various steps of the project, such as the analysis of the initial needs of the residents, the exchange of experiences, through the final phase of definition and use of the internet points have actually been defined by the citizens themselves, assisted by tutors and by local facilitators. This has allowed the creation of a common platform of knowledge and objectives.

One has to keep in mind that Mo.Di is a pilot project, and the immediate results are limited to the eighteen communities that participated. If the partners intend to foster its results beyond its duration, they have to enrich it with other initiatives. The internet points can be used to organize events and facilitate direct contact with the citizens.

As far as the platform is concerned, it offers the citizens a large number of services classified by categories. Each partner personalized the categories in order to fill-in them with services provided by their own administrations.

The Mo.Di project has produced broadly positive results. The only point of weakness, or challenge, has been the creation of a common set of services. The field survey has produced a list of needs by the local population, in terms of on-line public services. The elaboration of these results has generated a list of common services to all the participant countries. Amongst the ones selected by the population, only two services have been implemented in the on-line platform.

Partners were therefore unable to standardize the processes to produce and offer a new service. The

public bodies that produce the services are quite different and at times there are legal obstacles to the provision of the services. The partner of the project (in this case the province) is not the body that is entitled to implement the services requested by the citizens; in this case they would have needed an agreement with the proper bodies responsible for public transports, health, education, etc.. On the other hand, the province of Bergamo intended to extend the service even further, not only allowing patients to book medical prescriptions on line, but also delivering medicines ordered on line, via courier or similar means. In this case the public administration has not been able to fulfil the requirements of the citizens. After the creation of the infrastructure and the cultural environment to provide public services on line, it is now necessary to modify the processes used to provide such services. The partners can therefore use the pilot or the project as a starting base to extend its implementation.

The publicly accessible internet points with assistance received a very good response in the Mo.Di project, and enabled the citizens to experience and discuss the available e-government services. In many communities, the participants in discussions were critical of the current offering of e-government services or the lack of it. Thus the governments should carefully examine the needs of the population before developing new services. According to Slack and Rowley [8] access to e-government and e-democracy via accessible kiosks (internet points) should be carefully developed with consideration of: the applications to be delivered through a kiosk; one stop shop service and knowledge architectures; mechanisms for citizen identification; and the integration of kiosks within the total interface between public bodies and their communities.

By encouraging a more strategic approach, interregional cooperation actually aims to improve the effectiveness of regional development policies and instruments through large-scale exchange of information and sharing of experience (networks). There is no doubt that all participants in the Mo.Di project have gained benefits due to cost savings as well as other intangible advantages such as mutual understanding and information on a range of methods, services and best practises which could be transferred to a different geographic or thematic area. The partnership is planning to repeat the experience and has submitted the "Mo.Di 2" project proposal in INTERREG IVC, which should create new e-services in the same areas or implement the same online services in other areas.

The effect of the Mo.Di project should not end with its completion, but should be kept alive by the relevant public administrations and the populations themselves. The value of the project is also linked to the understanding of the importance of the results achieved and making them last. The experience gained through the pilot could also represent a base

for further, more ambitious projects on wider scale that could be presented in the context of the INTERREG IV C during the years 2007-2013.

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