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# MC-eGov Study on Multi-channel Delivery Strategies and Sustainable Business Models for Public Services addressing Socially Disadvantaged Groups

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## **CASE STUDY:**

**Access to eGovernment services for people with disabilities, Greece**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This document presents the key findings from a case study interview conducted during July 2008 as part of the MC-eGov study, being conducted by ECOTEC Research & Consulting on behalf of DG Information Society and Media.

The case study interview concerned Access to eGovernment for Disabled People in Greece and was conducted with:

- Mr Efstathios Triantafillou, President of the Board of Directors, IKPA (Institute of Social Protection and Solidarity);
- Professor Constantine Stephanidis, Director, Institute of Computer Science, Foundation for Research and Technology (ICS-FORTH), University of Crete;
- Theoharis Mihailidis, Project Manager, Information Society S.A.

The project was selected as a case study for MC-eGov to explore eGovernment developments affecting disadvantaged groups in Greece, including wider social policy issues relating to disability in particular. It should be read in conjunction with the Case Study report on eGovernment Citizen Service Centres (CSCs), which is also available on the MC-eGov website ([www.mcegov.eu](http://www.mcegov.eu)).

The remainder of this report is as follows. Firstly a background and overview of the case study is provided. The document then follows the framework of fundamental principles outlined in Study Deliverable 2.1, which provides a basis for the analysis of project cases:

- Background and overview
- Identification of personal
- Shaping organisations and policies
- Delivering services effectively

Finally the report offers conclusions and key messages.

## 2.0 BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Reporting to the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity, IKPA is the government agency responsible for promoting actions in the field of welfare, with a particular focus on the interests of disabled people. The Information Society S.A. is the government agency (reporting to the Interior Ministry) which has responsibility for identifying funding, scoping, tendering, contract management and other functions on behalf of the Ministry in support of information society research and projects funded through EU and national programmes. The budget for the projects that this organisation oversees is significant (in the order of 100s of millions of euros). ICS-FORTH has for 25 years been a central player (at European and national levels) in the research and development of accessibility tools and "design for all". The development and implementation of the IKPA project described here was made possible by the technical platform developed by ICS-FORTH.

The access to eGovernment project itself has its origins in 2003 (at ICS-FORTH in Crete), and IKPA took on responsibility for it in 2004, partly because legally it proved problematic to have an appropriate NGO take on the project<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There appears to be no legal barrier to their participation *per se* and indeed the participation of the voluntary sector in the provision of social care is protected by the Greek constitution. However, such partners must undergo a special certification process. There is no universally accepted definition of an NGO, and this is coupled with a lack of a tradition and culture of voluntary and non-profit work. There are many informal and fragmented arrangements that cover social needs. Labour market inflexibility is also a potential barrier to the development of greater capacity.

### 3.0 IDENTIFICATION OF PERSONAL NEEDS

The aim is to offer to people with disabilities fully accessible online services for eGovernment and to provide a fully accessible eGovernment portal. The project is linked strongly to the general implementation of eGovernment services in Greece via the network of Citizen Service Centres (CSCs) discussed in another MC-eGov case study<sup>2</sup>. In addition to ensuring that disabled people have access to the same services provided to everyone else through CSCs (e.g. making the online channel accessible), several other objectives are being pursued: in particular an online job-finding service for disabled people; a digital library of information and links on assistive technology products and services; and a voice portal as an alternative channel for the online CSC. Access will be through a dedicated web portal for disabled citizens ([www.amea.gov.gr](http://www.amea.gov.gr)), which will provide a route into the CSC and host the other services mentioned. The portal also serves as a point of information exchange and dissemination. This web portal will also be the principle way in to the main dissemination tool for the project to the wider public. The project started in April 2007 and will be fully implemented by November 2008. The service itself started operating in June 2008.

The necessary legal framework is in place concerning access for disabled people to various eGovernment services in Greece. In fact the climate is quite favourable in this respect and there is willingness on the part of the Minister to make any appropriate regulatory changes. However, implementation of the necessary improvements pose more of a challenge, in part because of prevailing cultural attitudes to the disabled in Greece. The generally held view is that it is primarily the responsibility of a disabled person's family to look after them, and there is little emphasis on supporting the disabled to access employment. It is not common in Greece to see disabled people working, and although the national NGO, the Confederation of Disabled People<sup>3</sup>, is strong (at EU level through the organisation's President), its impact does not extend to the whole range of issues and so elements including accessibility and benefits are not necessarily on the agenda. There is also a notable lack of joined-up thinking between Ministries regarding disability. Although progress has been positive in recent years, much work remains to be done in the field.

It was decided at national government level (the relevant ministries are Interior and Finance) that all projects concerning technology and disabled people should be the responsibility of one organisation to ensure effective implementation. This responsibility falls to IKPA, which is the sole Greek government agency responsible for the disabled.

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<sup>2</sup> Multi-channel Citizen Service Centres in Greece (CSC-KEP)

<sup>3</sup> [www.esamea.gr](http://www.esamea.gr)

## 4.0 SHAPING ORGANISATIONS AND POLICIES

A very important strand to IKPA's work concerns the assessment of disability, entitlement and information systems. This hinges on the need to change to current system where local committees decide on a person's percentage disability (or for each of a number of disabilities), and where entitlement to benefits is triggered if the subject is assessed to be at least 65% disabled. This system takes no account of ability or capacity to perform tasks or to work (i.e. there is no functional assessment). In addition, the system for recording relevant information is paper-based and no meaningful statistics are available for the number of disabled people in Greece. The current system lacks transparency and is subject to the types of irregularities that occur where control is exercised by local "gatekeepers" (municipalities/committees of doctors). IKPA has been working towards introducing a functionality-based assessment system (derived from the WHO/ICF framework) together, ultimately, with a "disabled card" which can be used to establish entitlement and reduce the widespread abuse of the system that occurs at the moment.

Despite the best efforts of IKPA and others (an information system is under development based on the proposed new classification system), the necessary legislation has yet to be passed and a number of other obstacles remain to its implementation. The new card-based system would have to be accepted by all government departments, but there appears to be resistance to change on the part of the Labour Ministry and the situation is further complicated by fragmentation of the National Insurance system through which health and pension benefits are funded (there are currently about 120 different schemes, many based on professions). In fact IKPA estimates that introducing the new system would result in fewer claimants. The new system would of course also allow the collection and use of useful data. Three types of cards are envisaged – a "life-time" card, one lasting 3-5 years and another 5-10 years. IKPA sees the disability ID card as the key to the future of improved services for the disabled. This would remove the need for disabled people to visit a host of government departments, for example to collect the certificates required to obtain a bus pass. This experience with efforts to upgrade the benefits and entitlement system for disabled people illustrates one of the main challenges facing eGovernment – lack of integration and the reluctance of government departments to embrace collaborative approaches.

In some cases where services are fully online (e.g. the Greek tax revenue service) the transaction need not necessarily always be completed entirely online, offering citizens the convenience of a choice of channels – for example, certain forms may be downloaded, but need not be submitted electronically once completed. In the case of the tax service, a fax-back service is offered for tax certificates (proof of payment of taxes). Interestingly, where an eGovernment process is not wholly electronic and it is possible to offer, for example, the vision-impaired the option of completing the transaction by telephone (which may represent an enhanced, more personalised service than that available to the generality of customers), the reaction of disabled groups is, understandably, to insist that a disabled person should have access to the same online services as the majority of the population, even where there may be no particular qualitative or economic advantage to the disabled user. This finding supports the argument that choice is the overriding consideration for many.

## 5.0 DELIVERING SERVICES EFFECTIVELY

Professor Stephanidis described the ground work that had been done over an extended period (starting some 25 years ago) to promote, and facilitate technically, accessibility for all to the benefits of ICTs. This has three main pillars: the policy level, market development for assistive technologies, and standardisation. The latter is only now becoming a reality after more than 20 years. Prof. Stephanidis and others were engaged with developments at EU level, while progress at national level in Greece was relatively slow. However, once momentum had been built, it became feasible to propose a national project – a number of projects were supported but they had little impact since critical mass was never achieved.

The current project is very focused, representing an attempt to understand and address the underlying challenge (accessibility), and it is being implemented by a consortium which brings a wide range of expertise, giving it a better chance of making a lasting impact. IKPA is the key end-user with the capacity to internalise the results and approach. In the past there were many national projects that provided support for ICT and disabled people, whereas many potential beneficiaries did not have access to broadband. One of the spill-over results of the current project is that it runs in parallel with the far larger national eGovernment Framework (e-GIF) – the project provides e-GIF with specifications and information on standards relating to providing access for disabled people to eGovernment services.

Prof. Stephanidis acknowledged that the role of technology could be either positive or negative and that if it is permitted to grow unmediated the impacts will be mostly negative. It is important to embed the concept (of accessibility) at the beginning of any technical service development cycle, taking diverse user requirements, addressing users as a broad, inclusive group, not just targeting disabled people for example. Developers need to view users as different people who have individual needs. In terms of development, the following components are critical:

- User profile – understanding user needs, and consider the interfaces needed for given users given the task in hand.
- Consider the technology platform (mobile, ambient etc.)
- Establish the context of use – at the office, in the home etc. – to achieve design for all, not just specific fixes for the disabled.
- Keep the ultimate goal or task in mind at all times.

Of course there will be situations where accessibility cannot be addressed, and in these cases a reactive approach is necessary. But this should only be a secondary approach and there is a real danger of spending a significant amount of time and resource fixing a problem that has disappeared by the time the "solution" is ready to be implemented. In terms of wider trends, gradually certain online services will become predominant, such as e-banking for example. In such cases the solution may be to use intermediaries and customised solutions to ensure inclusiveness. Where trends are in some ways inevitable, there are three possible reactions: overcome limitations through R&D; standardize products; and finally regulate (as a last resort). Industry should of course recognise the market potential offered by certain groups, but it is also true that in some (smaller) countries domestic markets are too small to make it worth while. Products and services with an international reach, but which can be "localised" are therefore one

way forward. This moves the issue into the realm of EU policy (as an issue of improving the single market).

It was noted that disabled groups were involved in the design of the new services and that local, regional and national representatives groups are well organised to input their views. The job-finding element in particular is an important element of the new portal, linking up the Government's employment services to connect disabled people to the labour market. This service involves companies entering into sponsorship agreements to hire disabled people and highlights the importance of combining services to provide improved outcomes for customers and government. There are also plans to expand the service and to evaluate its impact. One of the major challenges is the lack of data available in Greece, which would allow a better understanding of customer needs.

## 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The case explored here highlights a number of key issues which have important implications for the emerging inclusive eGovernment agenda:

- The establishment of a robust eGovernment infrastructure (the CSCs) means that the necessary infrastructure is in place upon which to build further inclusive eGovernment services.
- The technical platform developed by project partner CSC-FORTH is central, providing an accessible portal to complement the main CSC service. Without this technical expertise, access for disabled people to eGovernment services would not have been possible.
- Although no specific priority was given to disadvantaged groups in developing the CSC, the new system provides benefits to all citizens (in particular the transformation has included a multi-channel approach, so that not only is face-to-face contact possible, but in many cases it is the first time any convenient personal contact has been available).
- The development of an ID card for disabled people has enormous potential to deliver service improvements not only to this group, but to all citizens. As such, it may be considered an important spearhead development and test of government commitment to continued eGovernment improvement.
- The developments being pursued by IKPA (eGovernment portal and ID cards for disabled people) are illustrative of powerful ways in which technology can be used to reduce the administrative burden imposed by government and enable synergies between traditionally separate agendas (in this case entitlement to benefits and employment services).