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G3ICT- Procurement for COVID recovery webinar

June 21<sup>st</sup> 2022- 16:00

ICTs play a vital role in everybody's empowerment, represent an enabler for inclusion in society. Additionally, ICTs have the potential to quickly improve people's lives, by facilitating access to information, basic services, healthcare, education and, in general terms, society. Hence, articles 9 and 30 of the UN Convention for the rights of persons with disabilities emphasize that "accessibility of ICTs is an integral part of the access rights of Persons with Disabilities", and several SDGs highlight the impact of ICT accessibility in the development of global inclusive societies. But these technologies are not always accessible or available to everyone. We still have a long way to walk in front of us until we reach a complete and acceptable inclusive level of accessibility.

In this regard, governments must be the main leaders in developing and implementing comprehensive policies and strategies for ICT accessibility, and bear the duty of ensuring all citizens, including persons with disabilities, enjoy the same rights and opportunities. The adoption of effective policies and standards at a national level can create an enabling environment for ICT accessibility and thereby accelerate implementation of inclusive societies at national and regional level. And public procurement is one of the main instruments every government must implement and promote business and technological advances.

Regarding the EU, much progress has finally been achieved last years when it comes to equal access to ICT. We ratified various legislation, all lead by the European Accessibility Act, with a very strong ICT component. This creates clear accessibility-related indications, together with the public procurement Directive and the Regulations covering EU funding and investments. And to underpin this legislation we also need technical standards, suitable for industry, public administrations, and users, because these standards build the foundations from which future inclusive innovation can emerge. This is happening in Europe through the standard for digital accessibility.

It's worth mentioning how the Commission has understood the importance of consulting with persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in all matters related to them. A relevant example is one of the main flagship initiatives of the European Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030, the creation of a knowledge centre known as AccessibleEU in which national and international experts will exchange information and conduct trainings on accessibility standards.

Now this is more needed than ever. In addition to the dreadful situation brought by COVID-19 to millions of persons with disabilities, the pandemic also catapulted our societies into a more digital life, which in principle should have also meant a more equal access to persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, due to the poor design of certain technologies, and wrong choices of certain public authorities and companies, instead of benefiting from this digital opportunity, many persons with disabilities still faced barriers preventing them from studying and working remotely, or communicating with family and friends, or accessing culture and leisure through ICT.

We are in the recovery process, still facing new obstacles, but with new tools and instruments, such as the Next Generation EU and the Recovery and Resilience Plans, that implement it. This is summed to quickly evolution of technologies, that can rapidly be changed and replaced for more inclusive ones with far more possibilities and functions.

We now have the legislation, we have key standards, we have the environment for the institutions and Member States to buy and implement accessible solutions, but to really achieve accessibility by default we need to keep on raising awareness, and developing the necessary tools so public authorities, companies, innovators, and future professionals consider accessibility as one of the core aspects of new technologies. Then, accessibility will come by default.

I wish us all to achieve this goal soon; and wish you all fruitful discussions during the conference.