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PROCUREMENT, ACCESSIBILITY, AND A MORE INCLUSIVE COVID RECOVERY

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        (recording in progress)
        >> JAMES THURSTON: Welcome. We'll be starting in just a minute as people are coming into the event. Good afternoon. Welcome, we'll be starting in just one minute as we allow people to join the event. Okay. I think we'll get started. Hello. Welcome to this, what I think will be a very interesting and important discussion today about procurement, accessibility, and a more inclusive recovery in Europe.
        I'm James Thurston, Vice President for strategy and development at G3ict. We are an international nonprofit set up about six years ago with focus on the United Nations to focus on inclusion and rights of people with disabilities around the world.

Before we go any further, I'd like to ask a colleague of mine to talk through some of the supports and features that we have available to make this discussion more available. Yulia, would you like to talk through those items?

>> YULIA SARVIRO: Sure. Thank you, James. My name is Yulia Sarviro. I'm a senior project manager at G3ict. I work with James. And today, I would like to walk you through some of the session practices that will make our discussion today more accessible and convenient for everybody. So first of all, this meeting is recorded.

It will be made available to public through G3ict website, and we will inform, of course, all the participants, those who registered for the event.

We have CART available in English so you can switch the captions, by clicking on show subtitles in the menu.

Or you can also check with the link in the chat. We also have auto translated captions that are available in French, German, and Spanish. Please also check the chat. The links will be there.

Finally, we have international sign language interpretation available. You can always ping our interpreters by right clicking on their videos.

We would ask the panelists to keep the microphones muted unless you are speaking, and to the audience, in case you would like to ask a question to a panelist, please use Q&A session, not the chat. The chat, we will reserve for any technical issues or just a general command.

Q&A sessions are scheduled a couple of times throughout the discussion so you will be having the opportunity to ask the questions through different parts of our discussion today and of course if there are any questions or comments you would like to make, please send them to our email at smartcities4all.org.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you. As we get start, let me offer a description of myself. I'm James, a white male. I have glasses, a blue shirt. I'm standing in front of a white background with a logo of G3ict, my nonprofit organization. I'm really honored to be one of today's co-hosts along with the European Disability Forum and Microsoft. We've partnered with these two organizations for some time now, really, on a series of round table discussions on how governments in Europe can use their procurement processes and use standards and really their enormous purchasing power to advance greater accessibility and inclusion for people with disabilities across Europe.

So, together with those organizations and with leaders and experts from across Europe, we've really touched on some important topics like inclusive education and making sure that technology purchased by governments for classrooms is accessible and inclusive in places of employment, workplaces, making sure that as governments buy technology that they use to run themselves that those workplaces

are also accessible and inclusive. Today, we're going to explore together an opportunity to use the really significant digital transformation investments that are part of the European Recovery and Resilience Facility to use those to drive greater accessibility, not less, and greater inclusion for persons with disabilities across all the Member States.

    We know that we can see that the global pandemic has really accelerated digital transformation of governments and of society and we really need to avoid the risk of divide if those recovery funds are not spent on accessible.

    Our goal today is to use these to point governments, Civil Society originals and industries towards using procurements in the European accessibility standards to support an inclusive COVID recovery. With that, I'd like to ask our two partners to make some welcoming remarks as well. Humberto from the European Disability Forum. Would you like to make some remarks?

    >> HUMBERTO INSOLERA: Great. Thank you and good afternoon, everyone. My name is Humberto Insolera. I'm a deaf person. I'm wearing a blue and black coat. I'm from Italy.

    Want to say thank you all, thank you all for being here and thank you for being in this such a good event about procurement for very good recovery after COVID-19.

    We need to say that ICTs play a vital role in everybody's empowerment. Representing for inclusion in society. Additionally, ICTs have the potential to improve people while facilitating access to information. Basic services, healthcare, education, and in general terms, society.

    Hence articles nine and 30 UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and besides that, accessibility of ICTs is an integral part of the access rights of persons with disabilities.

    And several SDGs highlight the impact of ICTs, accessibility, in the development of global inclusive societies. But these technologies are not always accessible or available for everyone.

    We still have a long way to work 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 development and implementing comprehensive policies and strategies for ICT's accessibility. And the duty of ensuring all citizens, including persons with disabilities, enjoy the same rights and opportunities.

    And the adoption of effective policies and standards at a national level can create and enable environment for ICT's accessibility and thereby accelerating implementation of inclusive societies and national original level.

    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 ICTs. We're ratified various legislation all led by the European Accessibility Act, the EAA with very strong ICT components. This reflects clear indications together with the procurement directive and regulation covering EU funding and investments.

And to underpin it, this legislation, we also need technical standards, for industry, public administration, and users because these standards build foundation from which future inclusive innovation can emerge.

It is worth mentioning how the administration has consulted persons with disabilities in all matters related to them. One of the main initiatives of European disability right strategy 2021 and 2030, the creation of a knowledge-centered accessible EU in which national and international experts will exchange information and conduct trainings on accessible standards.

Now, it is more important than ever in addition to dreadful situation brought by COVID-19, to millions of persons with disabilities, the pandemic also includes or societies into a more digital life which should also mean more equal access to persons with disabilities.

Unfortunately, due to the poor design of certainly technologies and wrong choices of certain public authorities and companies, instead of benefiting from this digital opportunity, many persons with disabilities are still facing barriers preventing them from studying and working remotely or communicating with family and friends or accessible through ICTs.

We are in the recovery process, still facing new obstacles, but with new tools and instruments such as the next generation EU and recovery resilience plans that's implemented. I wish you all to achieve this goal soon and wish you all fruitful discussions during this conference.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Humberto, thank you very much for those remarks and really for the partnership between G3ict with EDF. I think it's great that you start this discussion today by focusing on the importance of policy instruments and on technical standards when it comes to inclusion and accessibility.

So, thank you very much for that. Our other partner in these conversations about procurement by governments in Europe and accessibility and inclusion for some time now has been Microsoft.

And I'd like to ask Esa Kaunistola to make some welcoming remarks.

>> ESA KAUNISTOLA: Thank you, James. Yes, I'm Esa Kaunistola, director at Microsoft and government affairs leading accessibility policy. I'm wearing spectacles and a shirt with blue checks. I'm

indeed delighted about G3ict organizing this event today. This is indeed due to our long-lasting partnership with these two great organizations. We at Microsoft seek to support our customers and partners through an inclusive digital transformation for all.

This is actually very much in accordance with our mission between power to every person and organization in the planet to achieve more. And now, it is, indeed, very crucial to ensure that Europe's recovery is inclusive and that people with disabilities are fully benefiting from it. There's a unique opportunity to use the digital transformation investments and recovery and resilience to breach the digital divide. Today we shall discuss how governments, Civil Society organizations and industries can use procurement to support inclusive investments in digital transformation.

And as well, it has mentioned here, not to forget about standard for accessibility.

Equally importantly, we will also hear about the role of procurement in Europe's digital transformation as Member States, implementing the national recovery funds and ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities.

We are very much looking forward to the discussion that certainly will prove to be interesting, given the group of experts joining us, including those representing European Commission and the Belgian disability forum. Finally, my colleagues Silvia Mestres will discuss more closely the role that industry can pay in supporting disability and give an update on the EU's inclusion update.

G3ict and EDF, thank you very much for convening this event and for our good work cooperation as always. Over to you, James.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Esa, thank you very much and again, I know as we do work on these issues of accessibility and procurement around the world, really, in Europe, it's really useful to have industry, to have technology vendors like Microsoft in particular expressing your support for wanting to compete and innovate based on accessibility so we appreciate your partnership and your support from Microsoft.

Okay. So let's begin. The first part of this conversation today, we'll get an overview of and discussion of the European Recovery and Resilience Facility.

To start, we're really fortunate to have with us Félix Poirier, from the European recovery and resilience task force. It would be great if you could share with us an overview of the Facility and how it deals with digital transformation and even with persons with disabilities and inclusion.

>> FÉLIX POIRIER: Thank you very much, James, and good afternoon to all of you. So, as you said, my name is Félix Poirier. I am 30

years old white male and I am French, but today, presenting in English, of course, with a bit of a French accent.

And I'm very glad to talk to you today about the Recovery and Resilience Facility which is the tool that the Union gave to itself in order to recover and recover stronger from the COVID crisis.

So, I will start with general backgrounds on the Union's response to the COVID crisis and on the COVID Recovery and Resilience Facility. I will then talk about inclusiveness, in regard to persons with disabilities, and how the Facility addresses these challenges. The

And finally, I will give you a few examples of measures included in the national plans of Member States which are relevant for the discussions of today.

So, starting with the first slide on my presentation. The adoption of the next generation EU recovery plan, which is the recovery plan for the entire Europe to place in the summer of 2021.

It was basically the move from the management of the COVID crisis, rather in crisis management mode, to move to the recovery for the Union, its Member States and for its citizens.

And within next generation EU, the Recovery and Resilience Facility was established, and it was an unprecedented instrument at the Union level.

Moving to the next slides I will give you a bit more information about the Facility. First of all, it is unprecedented when it comes to its size because it goes up to 602.5 billion Euros to be given in grants on one hand and loans on the other hand and it creates a set of criteria for the national plans to be accepted. I will not go through all of them, but maybe two which are of particular importance for the Facility are the objectives of covering at least 37 percent of investments in order to support the green transition, and particularly relevant for today's discussion, 20 percent objective of contribution to the digital transition that is ongoing in Europe in the world.

So, going to the next slide. As of today, we have already 26 national plans out of 28, which have been endorsed by the Commission. Meaning that the Commission has found that these plans do fulfill the requirement of the regulation on the Facility and therefore these plans are now already in the face of being implemented and there are still two plans which are currently being discussed with Netherlands and Hungary before they can be adopted by the council and Commission.

Going to the next slides. I would like to spend a bit more time on the digital transition. It is one of the key objectives of the Facility, and that is why there is an obligation for Member States to dedicate at least 20 percent of their envelope to the digital transition.

On average, what we have witnessed is that the contribution is higher than 20 percent, which is on average, around 26 percent for

all the Member States. So, this 26 percent amounts to a very big amount of money for the first 22 plans. It was around 117 billion Euros, so this is an unprecedented effort to support the digital inclusion and they go to a number of key investments in a large variety of fields.

In particular, I would mention the digitalization of public administration and of public services. So, for instance, there is, in many plans, a focus on ensuring that public services can be more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities and there are plenty of investments supporting this perspective.

The keyway in which the Recovery and Resilience Facility functions is to combine investments and reforms meaning that we are not only standing money, but we are also reforming the underlying legal efforts in the Member States to ensure that our economies can be more resilient and that the investments that we make can be more efficient.

So, we are taking down administrative barriers and we are modernizing public services and administrations through very important reforms in the Member States. In the field of digital transition, this relates to reforms of public administration, reforms of the regulatory framework, for instance, related to the 5G coverage, or reforms in the education fields to ensure that digital skills can be promoted in the curriculum.

And finally, when it comes to the digital transition, the facilities support very significant cross-border projects. For instance, by financing 5G corridors which go through the territory of several Member States. Going to the next slides, I will now explain to you which the contribution of the Facility is to supporting equal opportunities for all and especially when it comes to people with disabilities. Of course, the Union recognizes and respects the rights of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures which are designed to ensure that independence, social and integration and participation in the life of the community.

This is a general principle, and it is a general principle which Member States must show has been taken into account when preparing their plans. So, they need, first of all, to explain how their plan is going to contribute to equal opportunities for all and how this objective has been mainstreamed. Mainstreaming is a very important word that we use more and more in EU policies to ensure that throughout the national plans, and throughout the different kinds of measures, until the green digital transition, other types of measures, we try and Member States show that they try to indeed mainstream the objectives of equal opportunities.

One important obligation for the plans was to respect the recommendations that were given to each Member States in the last few years in the context of what we call the European semester. And these recommendations which are of a microeconomic nature, they

notably refer directly or indirectly to persons with disabilities. So, where a Member State had a specific recommendation to take care of an issue which relates to persons with disabilities, there was an obligation and other regulation to address at least a significant subset of these challenges.

Another important element of the Facility is that plans must contribute to the European pillar of social rights. As you probably know, the European pillar of social rights sets out a number of principles in three different areas, equal opportunities, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion.

And all of these principles relate to the lives of persons with disabilities. So, addressing the issues of the pillar of social rights also require looking more in depth into the situation of persons with disabilities.

And actually, in the RF, so, in the regulation and in the Facility, we also have specific pillars, and notably, two pillars related to the digital transition and to social cohesion which are particularly relevant when it comes to specific inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities.

And finally, I wanted to stress that we are now at the implementation stage for most of the plans. So, they have been adopted. They have been validated. But the contribution that they will have to promoting equal opportunities and the extent to which they will be inclusive in the way that they are implemented will depend on how they are implemented in practice.

So, we have encouraged as the European Commission Member States to put in place an inclusion process to monitor the implementation of the plans and notably by including the NGOs for inclusion of vulnerable groups in the process of implementation.

We have also encouraged Member States to introduce data disaggregated by groups such as members with disabilities in order to see what the actual impact is on the ground and based on this implementation, there will be a number of reporting tools that will be put in place.

And notably, we have put in place authenticated website, which is the recovery and resilience score board, which displays the process of implementation of national plans on that website. Now, if you allow me to go to my next slides, and it's actually the last one that I wanted to discuss with you today, I wanted to give you a few examples of measures in national plans which relate to the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

It's important that I say, again, that Recovery and Resilience Facility is implemented by each Member State through a national plan. So, building the plan was a responsibility of each Member States. Member States decided what to do and how they wanted their plan to look like.

Of course, as they actually respected the framework of the regulation and the framework that we have given to ourselves of the entire Union.

Each plan contains a lot of measures, actually. We have a lot, we have more than 4,000 measures in total in all the plans, and I wanted to discuss a few which are relevant to promoting equal opportunities for all. In particular, the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

So, I've noted a few sectors where you can find such measures. It's not an exhaustive list, but it gives you a better overview of the type of reforms and investments that we are supporting to the Facility.

To give you an example in the field of social and employment support, the Italian plan contains a very encompassing framework on disability which has been passed by the Italian government recently and which was actually a commitment taken by the Italian government before forms could be disbursed from the Facility.

So, this reform, included, for instance, strengthening of the offer of social services by the district and the revision of the procedures for accessing disabilities.

In Belgium, so, in the Belgium plan, in the field of employment supports. The plan for specifically bonus scheme. So, a scheme providing a bonus to support employers in the recruitment of job seekers with disabilities.

In the field of education and skills, we have plenty of measures which are either directly or indirectly relevant. In the Romanian plan, to give you one, there is the development of inclusive and educational resources and including digital resources which are meant to support the inclusion of those with disabilities.

In the Spanish plan, there is a comprehensive reform of the University system, and notably, an improvement of the inclusion of students with disabilities and reinforced scholarships to encourage them to take part in the University pursuits.

In the field of accessibility, which is very broad, we have measures for accessibility, both building and accessibility of transport.

To give you maybe a few examples, in the Latvian plan, we have a reform meant to accelerate the renovation of buildings to make them more sustainable and to adapt them to the needs of persons with disabilities. In the Portuguese plan, we have a measure called Accessibility 360 which is also aimed at improving accessibility for people with disabilities in all public spaces, public buildings and dwellings and this is meant to apply throughout the Portuguese territory.

In the field of mobility, which is also quite important, I came across the example of the Croatian plan which aims at supporting the

system for persons with disabilities to exercise their rights in the field of mobility.

So, there will be in the Croatian plan a new single document for persons with disabilities allowing them to exercise all their mobility rights. So, this will largely simplify transportation in the field of Croatia and should increase access to both mobility and other critical public services in that country.

And finally, a field that is particularly important for our discussion today. More broadly, the digital field. I came across maybe the most relevant examples that they could identify in our national plans when it comes to notably public procurements in the field of digital, and one very good example is in the Latvian plan. In 2023, to announce innovative solutions to ensure better implementation for people with disabilities so there will be a new IT system that will be procured and shall meet the requirements of the accessibility directive and these of course will be important to improve access to online tools and public services in Latvia.

Also in the Latvian plan, actually, there are targets in our international plans of making a large part of the cultural resources available through the national online public platform.

And we will only disburse money from the Recovery and Resilience Facility in the objectives that are laid out in the plans are actually completed.

To give you maybe one more and one last example, I would mention the Spanish plan which aims at improving the accessibility of persons with disabilities to public services with a focus on improving community accessibility in communication with public authorities.

So, there will be a number of investments in the websites that need to be created that will be, of course, procurement to ensure that these websites are done in the best possible way. And there will be a number of our D&I research projects, research and development projects which will be funded in the area of community accessibility.

These are just a few examples of all the measures that we have in the plans. As I told you, in total, there are more than 4,000 of them. Many of them can be directly or indirectly relevant.

What is important and it comes at the bottom of my slide is that the stakeholders need to be involved in the process in order to achieve the most sustainable and inclusive recovery possible in Europe. So, we, as European Commission, encourage Member States and stakeholders to actively cooperate with each other to ensure that the measures implemented in the way that best ensures their inclusiveness.

So, we will continue to do that, and we'll continue to underline the importance of this involvement which is also why we are very happy that we are invited to speak today and which is also why we want to encourage you to continue your efforts and your outreach not only

to European Commission but also to national authorities because the implementation of the plans is just starting.

And your involvement will be essential to maximize the impact of the Facility. So, thank you very much, and we, of course, I am, of course, very happy to reply to any questions that you may have. Thank you very much.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Félix, thank you so much for a really useful summary of the Facility and in particular, thank you for pointing out some of the specific country plans and some aspects that are really relevant to this topic of accessible and inclusive digital transformation as part of the Facility.

I think it's really interesting to hear from you that the Member State plans are exceeding the 20 percent minimum investment in digital transformation and really the enormous investment in the digitization of public services in particular.

It really makes clear the important role of procurement and purchasing accessibility that we're discussing today so thank you for helping to set the stage for the conversation. We'll be hearing from you in a bit as well. Maybe to build on that, that really great overview from Félix, it would be useful, I think, to hear from you, Jeremy, from Microsoft, and really useful to hear how from an industry perspective, what you see as or what could be the opportunity for digital transformation as part of the Facility. Jeremy?

>> JEREMY ROLLISON: Thank you, James. And thanks for the chance to be here. For everyone's awareness, I'm a middle-aged white man with short hair. I work here in Microsoft's European Government Affairs office, and I manage the twin transition team.

So, we have borrowed some of the language from the European Commission to structure the team that we have here in the office. And as you can imagine in that title, our team's portfolio, policy engagement, is focused on the digital transformation that we see happening across our different customer segments.

Certainly, being accelerated in Europe. Our CEO mentioned that during the pandemic, we saw I think two years of digital transformation in two months. There's good news and bad news in that, I think.

And then, increasingly, we're talking about the green transition of many of our customers and other stakeholders are engaged in. So, really bringing together those two transitions and the building back better that the plans are aimed at achieving. I think that's capturing more and more of our attention. In our day-to-day policy outreach which focuses on things ranging from industrial data policy to trade policy, tax policy, consumer policy, and of course, accessibility.

But I think our experience during the pandemic was, on the one hand, again, there was this accelerated digital transformation, but we were thankful, I think, across the board, that we had digital infrastructure to fall back on and it allowed people to continue to go to work.

It allowed people to continue to speak with family members. Stay connected. Stay entertained in many instances.

But I think the experience was much, much different for those who were more isolated either through lack of access through some of that technology. Lack of connectivity possibilities. Lack of some of the skills that might sometimes be underestimated that are needed for leveraging some of these new digital tools.

So, we looked at some of the divides, I think, that were already present before the pandemic, to talk about data divides or digital divides.

You know, a lot of our conclusions there, I think, were only confirmed by what the pandemic highlighted. On the one hand, I think we're all thankful there was digital technologies that could be there to mitigate some of the isolation effects of the pandemic.

But, on the other hand, it highlighted where some of those divides are most pronounced. And I really did appreciate Félix's presentations because I think there's a number of examples I wanted to touch upon. I think we're really, really pleased as a digital company, of course, to see the emphasis and the plans on the digital transformation objectives. I think we're also very pleased to see the emphasis on sustainability and of course, the plans also focused a lot on inclusion, again, expressing maybe that divide point that I was mentioning earlier.

I think where I was going to intervene a bit today is where I think, I hope Félix doesn't take this the wrong way. There may have been a missed opportunity to be even more explicit about the criteria for accessibility and persons with disabilities. I think there's a lot of reference to inclusion in the context of plans, which is appropriate.

And you know, again, when I'm talking about divides, we think of rural communities that weren't connected in the same way as cities and others, education systems that didn't have the same level of infrastructure. The same level of technology.

But the divides go much, much bigger than that. And I think it's been exciting to hear Félix's presentation about the ways that Member States are acknowledging that inclusion efforts in a much broader fashion are really bringing in projects aimed at persons with disabilities, perhaps disproportionately during the pandemic.

We talked about those left behind during the pandemic. Workers that were displayed, professions that were displaced. New skills that needed to be learned and achieved. Ranging from office environments to educators to hairdressers across the board.

But I think, in a community like this, with some of the stakeholders that we work with, I think I can appreciate that some felt as though the accessibility community or persons with disabilities might not have had the same explicit references in criteria for national plans as you may have hoped.

But I was really heartened by a lot of what you hear coming from national Member States that they're picking up on that priority and the Commission has picked up on it so I'm actually really encourage after your presentation, Félix. So, thank you again for that.

Because we focus a lot on some of the connectivity priorities. At Microsoft, we focus on the digital transformation priorities and increasingly the sustainability priorities but it's really customers of ours that are engaged in these national levels, not Microsoft.

They may be building things or technologies and getting up to speed with some of our solutions but it's manufacturing customers. Partnering in all kinds of directions, especially in sustainability context and in skilling context and education context where more and more of our local partners are trying to leverage n opportunity to drive some of those outcomes.

But the key word to me is really just to drive those that were highlighted. Many we were aware of before and I think the pandemic confirmed it. In a digital sovereignty, were only confirmed bit pandemic.

As James said at the outset, I think the main message from today is amidst that opportunity that we want to be inclusive, building back better and accelerating some of those goals and closing those divides that we were aware of. I think this particular angle is one that, again, I think stakeholders could be forgiven for thinking maybe there could have been some more explicit references and criteria put in place.

But I also want to reflect what, I think Félix just shared.

I really do think it's fantastic to see whether it's in an education context, a skilling context, lifelong learning or it's access to resources and technologies. Some of the standards that were referenced there.

I think it's really great news that Member States are taking that on board and reflecting that in plan so look forward to hearing more about some of those rollouts and hopefully we can share some stories from our side about what some of those best practices might look like.

So, thank you, again, Félix. I can't say enough. I think that was really encouraging and I look forward to hearing more and hopefully answer any questions that you all have.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Jeremy, thank you so much for building on the remarks and overview from Félix and I think adding an important perspective from a technology company.

I think it's really encouraging to hear your optimism about the potential for using these digital transformation investments. Frankly, from a Civil Society perspective even a little unexpected to hear you pushing so hard on maybe doing better on the accessibility aspects of those investments so that's great to hear.

We'll be able to discuss a little bit more later on in the program today some specific steps on how we do that with both Félix and Jeremy and some others.

But, next steps, we've heard and gotten a good sense of the Facility and digital transformation and inclusion environments. I think next we want to explore the Facility and digital inclusion as part of the Facility and as part of those different transformation plans and investments.

So, here I'd like to ask Silvia Mestres of Microsoft to facilitate a conversation around some leaders from the European disability organizations. Silvia, would you like to jump in?

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Absolutely. Thank you, James. And thank you for having me here. I'm a middle aged white, extra white, woman, based in south from Europe, in Rosalyn, actually.

This webinar is about three of my passions. So, accessibility or people with disabilities. I was a worker myself for five years a long time ago. I'm in EU plans management for all my professional career and I'm in a technology company so this is the best place to be at the moment.

So, let me quickly introduce the speakers we have in the interim today. From the disability firm and from a national disability organization, we have Olivier Magritte from the Belgium disability forum and from Spain. Maybe they want to share themselves who they are before we kick off. So, Alvaro.

>> ALVARO COUCEIRO: Yeah, I'm going to start. Thank you so much, Silvia. My name is Alvaro Couceiro. I'm a white male as well. I work for the European Disability Forum which is known for its work around a hundred organizations for persons with disabilities that defend the interest of the 100 million persons with disabilities notice European Union and we work for implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and that includes of course working to ensure that new technologies are available, affordable, and accessible.

So, that's why we're here.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Thank you, Alvaro. And Almuneda?

>> ALMUNEDA ALCAIDE: Yes. Thank you, this is Almuneda. I am a white blondish lady with glasses spaced in Madrid. I am currently responsible for research and development group at Fundación ONCE. Thank you very much for having me here.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Olivier, the floor is yours.   You're on mute.

>> OLIVIER MAGRITTE: I always forget to switch on.   I'm Olivier Magritte.   I work for the European Disability Forum.   I'm a male in my late 50s.   I used to have a lot of brown hair.   And now I have a lot of salt and pepper hair.   I don't know if the expression exists in English, but in French, it does.
I am Belgium and my mother tongue is French, which explains my accent and I will be in competition with Félix on this topic.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Thank you so much, Olivier.   I think besides James and Jeremy, we are not English native speakers.   I think we are among friends, right?
So, heading to the questions.   The first one, and Félix was addressing and pointing out some of the investments under the National Recovery Plans.   But, how well do you think from the NGO's perspective, are the current recovery plans, digital transformation investments and strategies, account for inclusion?
So, how inclusive do you think these digital transformation investments are in the countries you have visibility on?
So, maybe from a European perspective, you can start, Alvaro?

>> ALVARO COUCEIRO: Yeah.   Perfectly.   So, about the particular, about the country's digital transformation strategies.   We have a good basis.   This is a turning point.   It's going to be really important for the next years.   We have a good basis both from the legislative scope and as well for the involvement of COVID recovery organizations.   Because as Félix explained before we needed both, accessible technologies as well as reforms of the existing context at national levels.
So, we have a good basis because there has been a lot of really good progress the last years.   We have the accessibility act which applies to funding and that includes recovery accessibility funds.   This contains specific accessibility requirements for ICTs that are supported by the most advanced technical norm.   Had the European standard 301-549, which is applied.   And we also have the COVID procurement directive from 2013 as we're speaking about this that makes it mandatory to include accessibility in the specifications.
And this is very important, it allows to use accessibility as an award criterion.   It's going to be really, really useful.   And last, but not least, of course, we have the accessibility requirements of the common regulations for 2027.
This is very comprehensible that says that we believe a correct base is for our advocacy objective.   That means that the investments that the European Union is planning for the next few years is

accessible. Of course, in every sense, we're speaking about the city.

And also, that it helps reform the actual grounds that we're working on. For example, it was mentioned before the web accessibility directive how now every public administration in Europe has to make accessible communications and accessible content with the public sphere.

So, many countries have already made clear that they will both invest directly in accessibility plans or that they will ensure that the accessibility requirements, the accessibility criteria in the regulations.

We are starting to share with international members that this investment as well as procurement are supported. We can control within the present. If this is fulfilled, we have to do it ourselves and eventually we'll try to analyze every plan but the best way for the Facility to check if this has been solved.

We have seen in the past problems with accessibility for example about the environment of funding. We have seen problems about investments in employment that our training was not inclusive to persons with disabilities. We try to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen with investment related to ICT.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Thank you, Alvaro. What about Belgium's plans? Olivier, how inclusive do you think it is?

>> OLIVIER MAGRITTE: Yes, about Belgium's plans, I will speak mainly about the implementation process. The answer is no, it will not pay enough attention to the situation of inclusion for persons with disabilities or at least it will go too slowly and not be precise enough.

About what we did, particularly, with Belgium's disability forum. The right to Belgium government last year in November or December to know how the government would use this huge amount of money from the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

And we insisted on several points for the digital inclusion of persons with disabilities.

We had to write and write again. And we and our members had to insist in meetings and so on a lot. And finally, end of March, we had the formal answer, and the answer was don't worry, we have a very good knowledge of the needs of all publics and especially of the needs of persons with disabilities. And it will be fully taken into account.

So you know, I work in the field of disability for 30 years. I have regular meetings with persons with disabilities, and almost every week, I learn new things about their needs.

So, I was really amazed to see that the minister could have such perfectly full and clear knowledge of the situation. Sorry to be bittersweet.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: No, no. Crystal clear.

>> OLIVIER MAGRITTE: This is how it goes for the implementation. It all has to be done in six months and how can you cope with all of the elements? And how can you cope with the situation of the week?
So, this implementation will almost certainly be based on a situation of the strongest. And the weakest will be forgotten and that's the main risk with this process which is a huge change in a very, very small time.
In fact, according to our experience about implementation of EU directives in Belgium, the Belgium governments always strictly limit to the content of the directive. They never adapt anything related to the Belgian situation. They just take it exactly like it is. Or like it was discussed at the European level.
In some way, Belgium is forgetting its own role and putting itself under the direction of EU. And they often say, oh, it's not us. It's the EU decision. So, sorry.
>> SILVIA MESTRES: Let me rearrange the panel and I will go towards the last question because your reply drives me to ask you, how the Belgian Disability Forum is going to monitor -- how you will be monitoring the compliance by the national and regional governments because in Belgium, the regions have a lot of weight. How will you be monitoring the implementation of the plans being compliant with accessibility, the priorities?
How will you be monitoring?

>> OLIVIER MAGRITTE: We will come to it later, maybe.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Now. Actually.

>> OLIVIER MAGRITTE: Now? I jump to the last one, then. We will go on insisting and insisting we will work with our technical colleagues from organizations that have expertise in these fields. And for the rest, we want to have close work together with organizations that are in close situations such as organization of elderly organizations.
Right now, the government has its own disability plan and we are working on it and it's part of it.
So, we are discussing regularity on it and we are bringing it, bringing back this subject regularly. Yep. That's how we can act. We cannot go really further.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Thank you, Olivier. Belgium besides hosting these, I think we have room for improvement everywhere. So, going back to the first question and you can connect it with the last one.

So, how inclusive you see the national recovery plans are addressing accessibility in ICT and how the rest of the NGOs will be monitoring how the governments are implementing and being compliant with these rules?

>> ALMUNEDA ALCAIDE: Okay. Thank you. Yeah, well, in Spain, like Félix was saying. The plan is well underway. The recovery and resilience recovery plan and directly from the government, we've had a few initiatives ready in form of projects for implementation in lots of help, et cetera. We've had accessibility also attached to this funding. The modernization and digitalization plan that Félix was talking about earlier on as well. So, yeah, we've had quite a few expressions, calls for expression of interest to guarantee the effectiveness of this plan and to ensure efficiency in the development of these projects.

So far, we've had 33 calls for express of interest so yes. I mean, there have been a few strategies accounting for inclusion of persons with disabilities. Actually, we believe that our participation in these strategies and programs and calls would have been enlarged and could be improved if they mentioned more explicitly like Jeremy was saying.

Our strategy has been to participate directly or indirectly in as many as possible of these calls and resilient Facility-based programs.

For example, we've placed globally smart technology platform for an inclusive and accessible EU stage of the Spanish language with design for accessible vague technologies.

We've worked and planned projects on assistive robotics platforms, accessible video conferencing platforms. We've worked with the royal pattern of disability and launched a variety of initiatives to do with litigation and employment.

We've also placed a global poll for research and development in accessibility and inclusion with a lot of series of interrelated solutions, based all of them on artificial intelligence and other disruptive technologies.

We've also planned global social data hub with data to share in a federated way data about disability and accessibility and that takes me to the second, to the third question that you were asking me how is it that we're going to monitor. And we've found like a niche of being able to enter in many programs and calls that have not got inclusion, as mentioned inclusion.

But we've found a niche and our strategy has been based on, and we've called inclusive, artificial intelligence.

And so, it's a way forward, a digital transformation, and this niche has been in two major problems that the digital transformation has when artificial intelligence is supplied to it and the data quality with regard to not only gender but to highlight that the bias is also towards disability and accessibility data, so we've found that's the way to entrepreneur many of these calls. Also, the need for data source asks well-known for the technologies based on these disruptive technologies. They need data. They need loads of data to operate and to train these algorithms so we've kind of created this huge, big data lake of data with for accessibility and disability and it's also where you're supporting and promoting the development of new technologies that come into these recovery and transformation Facility.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Thank you very much, Almuneda. Last and not least and we have a couple minutes left, Alvaro. How are you planning to join efforts with the Commission in pushing the national governments and reactional governments in monitoring this compliance because we have not seen the significant harm principle, very strictly applied to sustainability in all investments. Will we see any harm on accessibility, maybe or what do you think?

>> ALVARO COUCEIRO: Well, we hope not. Just as general overview how are we going to do it with support of our national members. Explain and with support of organization, this is the way that in the organization we have to analyze in particular plans at national level and then also as well programs. And then advocate with national governments and so on.

We work closely with the Commission. Now is the moment for implementation.

It's a moment to work at national level while we still ensure that the Commission takes into account these regulations that we were speaking about before. Afterwards, the other job that we'll have to do is the open channels for national organizations, for persons with disabilities, to channel complaints whenever they see that the accessible investments are not fulfilled so then we can gather them and boost our advocacy to European level.

We also will plan to do two things. First, we'll do workshops with national organizations so we can coordinate and try to do the best analysis and assessment at national level and at the same time we'll plan charities on the main projects to guarantee to ensure that they have been made accessible and then in the end they'll develop a full report that perhaps some missed opportunities.

But there are others, the most important phase will be to support unanimous members at the recommendation phase.

>> SILVIA MESTRES: Thank you so much the three of you for having these umbrellas overview and national overview.

Let me give the floor back to James for the next round table. And thanks so much.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Absolutely. Thank you so much for those insights and really I think for making real points that Félix made at the beginning of our conversation which is how important it is for disabled organizations and Civil Society to be defined in making these plans and making sure that the procurements in the implementation of these digital strategies is accessible and inclusive.

Before we move on to the next speaker, I did want to point out that there is a question from Ben about the goals under the, I think, under the Facility and whether or not they're smart goals, which I think means specific and timely and measurable and I don't know Felix or Jeremy if you might want to check out that question in the Q&A.

So, we've heard about the urgency of making sure that these Facility investments across the Member States are accessible and now I think it would be really helpful for us to understand how these investments relate to current and even pending European accessibility and inclusion policy and standards activity and how those policies and standards might guide the Facility investments.

So, I don't think there's anyone better situated to make these important linkages of the Facility to European accessibility and inclusion policy and standards. Our next speaker which is Inmaculada Placencia-Porrero from the European Commission. Ima?

>> INMACULADA PLACENCIA-PORRERO: Hi. Good afternoon to everybody. It's really a pleasure to be with all of you and in this very interesting and very interesting meeting. I think I was particularly pleased to see in the interventions, first, consensus about the need of having digital investments to be accessible.

Second, to have such also consensus around the instruments that we have been putting in place during these years. The legislation and the standards, and third, the fact that we have some good examples in some Member States.

We are aware that not all of the plans and all investments are accessible. It's something that it is clear. We have heard from the disability organizations but we also have heard some good examples from my colleague Félix.

And this shows a change in trends. And that change in trends is really, I think, reflecting, as I said, these policies and legislations that we have been having and how we have accompanied the legislation.

So, let me start by saying that in relation to the recovery and resilience plans, the Commission issued some guidance to the Member States indicating how, what aspects to cover.

And there, Félix referred to the general clause on gender equality where it has a specific reference to accessibility but there is a second document, a guidance provided which I really think is important, a working document 2021-12 and is part one of two parts. And is again a guidance to Member States on the recovery and resilience plans.

And there, you can see that we have been explicit about how to implement these equal opportunities for all and their specific reference to nondiscrimination in the basis of disability, on the grounds of disability among others.

But also the fact that the rights of persons with disabilities must be respected in line with the Convention and also specifically reference how accessibility has been included.

I have to admit, as some of the previous speakers have said that this regulation is not as explicit as, for example, the regulation on shared management funds where there is a specific article requiring to ensure accessibility in all the stages of spending the funds.

But we are bringing together a number of instruments in these processes. We have many of this work will be fall under the public procurement directives and already for some time, we have an obligation to buy accessible. So, when these funds are going to be used through public procurement, there is an obligation to do so renting accessibility and I would like to highlight that failure to do so could even lead to cancellation of the calls, so this is a very serious and very powerful instrument and we see really that change that Félix referred to with some good examples.

However, we have included experts and carried out study looking to digital plans. Digital transformation plans but also digital investment plans to see how they would reflect the accessibility of ICT and how explicit it was, and the result was really disappointing because while there were some good examples, there is no systematic inclusion of accessibility in all these plans.

We will soon publish the study and where, it addresses all these plans at a national level.

It also, what was also important to see is that the study also looked to disability plans. Plans to include persons with disabilities and investments on disability strategies and there, what we saw was also that digitalization didn't get on accessibility in digitalization, didn't really get the attention that one could expect, given the relevance of this digital transitions.

So, our legal framework is explicit. I think we have very good instruments to move forward. They can be strengthening and in particular, we need to be careful that in the future when we have new legal instruments, this issue is probably reflected but we are now shifting our attention to implementation.

To facilitate the implementation of accessibility, ICT accessibility in this case by stakeholders. And the disability strategy digital sent strategy makes very clear that point and announces the launching of an accessible use center that has an objective. The coherent and implementation of new law and the facilitation of implementation of accessibility by stakeholders that have to do so.

We are also continuing investing in the development of standards because these standards would provide, let's say, a technical option of, to implement the legislation.

Yesterday, if I'm not mistaken, the draft of the mandate, yesterday or today, is being sent now to the committee in order to require standards to accompany the European accessibility act.

Those standards will also be usable in public procurement. The accessibility act refers specifically to the use of those standards in public procurement but also in EU funds.

So, basically, it's the act indicates that whenever there are references to accessibility in EU legislation, if the accessibility requirements of the act are used then there would be presumption of compliance with that obligation or that requirement of accessibility, that the standards could be used also in this context.

So, I think that we have, and we continued to work on the facilitation, the implementation of accessibility. The professionalization of the work is critical, is critical, because we need technical experts would be able to implement, be knowledgeable, compliment that they have the capacity to implement accessibility but also on the procurement side.

So, in the procurement side, there is an initiative ongoing on accessibility there. We have developed this guidance and I would like to really recommend those involved in procurement and spending of funds through procurement, to read it. Is guidance on buying social, how to buy accessible, in particular, is wider than accessibility but it contains really references to the legislation. It contains references to the standards and how they can be used.

Critical, it's going to be, the concept of accessibility that we are going to use or that is going to be used.

There is a lot still between the context of what is accessibility. Having a universal design or design for approach. At the end, what we are promoting is to have EU level standards that define accessibility. In the strategy the Commission, for example, committed there to these EU level standards.

Why is that? Because accessibility is at the end of the day defined by its requirements. It is not an absolute concept. At the end we are removing or preventing the most common barriers that persons with disabilities face. If the standard is lough, if the requirements are minimum, the result would be a limited accessibility.

So, we need to be ambitious on having wide requirements, tackling many barriers, as many barriers as possible, to make sure that the result of accessibility is serving the purpose so that persons with disabilities can have equal access to product services, facilities, infrastructures, that finance with European funds.

Let me also say that in the funds, when you're talking about services, investments and services, it is really important, also, to promote the notion of reasonable accommodation and that there are funds reserved to provide that reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities because only when accessibility goes hand in hand with reasonable accommodation, we will achieve equal access with the rights.

This is how I see the recent developments and I think that there is a positive trend, but we need to anchor that trend and we need to facilitate by dressing up the instruments, that attention paid to instruments that will facilitate instrumentation.

So, thanks, James. I give you back the floor.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Great. Thank you so much, Ima. And don't go too far away because we'll be pulling you back for the final minutes of our discussion today.

I think we've heard an enormous amount of useful information about the Facility, in particular, the inclusion and digital transformation aspects of the Facility.

We've certainly heard from some of our Civil Society and disability organizations in Europe, about the important part of accessibility as part of those investments. Ima, you provided a good framework about the policy and standards, and I like the use of the term ambitious, wanted to be ambitious.

Maybe we can use that as a segue. I'd like to maybe pull new, Ima, Félix, Jeremy and Alvaro, just for some final thoughts as we wind down today's conversation, final thoughts on looking forward.

And what specific steps should Member State governments be doing today to ensure greater focus on accessibility inclusion of these digital transformation investments under the Facility funds, with the Facility funds?

And maybe we can just hear briefly from each of you. I'll just sort of do a Round Robin to you all on really action oriented specific steps that Member States should be doing. And if you want to add something about how Civil Society or industry can support that progress, absolutely do. Alvaro, maybe start with you on ideas on specific steps as we move into specific implementation of these plans, specific steps that Member State governments can be doing to ensure a focus on accessibility and inclusion.

>> ALVARO COUCEIRO: Sure. Thank you so much. These steps, briefly, I think main steps which can be supported with European funding. First of all, of course, the development, we're speaking

of accessible technology for which procurement is one of the most relevant tools. Applying the standard, proposing it as criteria, helps with harmonization.

It should be plainly administering criteria for the development of accessible technology from our point of view. Then, we haven't spoken about it, but invest in digital vocation, vocational training, skills for people with disabilities together with those far away from the market.

As we said, there's a huge risk of enhancing the digital gap. We spoke about that. If this is not done in an inclusive way, we might risk losing 100 million people from it because it's not exclusively being able to have that same organization now days.

So, Member States include the way they apply exception with state relations to allow them to benefit hiring persons with disabilities in the digital sector.

And then the last step I think will be together with improving training of persons with disabilities in digital skills, include accessibility of, Member States should include accessibility in the curricula, for engineering, technological careers, to be started.

The final goal is accessibility and therefore inclusion which understood from the very first steps of technological digital development. As we said, this can be all supported through European funding.

How can we support organizations, DPOs, we must work hand in hand with our industry? We tried to do so. Receiving expert inputs, stakeholders have to include persons themselves with disabilities and DPOs understand that we must support a way for them to be inclusive.

This goes from the program at face, as we have already worked in the regulations, to the implementation. And the industry must ensure that they do not use recovery and resilience funding for non-accessible discriminatory policies. As DPOs, we must assist these investments. Thank you so much.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Alvaro. Really great inputs and I like the sort of systemic approach, including looking at skills and connectivity and other issues that are critical. Thank you for that.

Félix, maybe next to you, with some thoughts from your unique perspective looking at all these country plans. Any specific steps, directions that you would recommend for governments to take to make sure that these digital transformation efforts are accessible and inclusive?

>> FÉLIX POIRIER: Thank you, James. And thank you very much to all the speakers. It's actually very, very nice to hear so much feedback from all of you on how the plans are actually seen by you, by the stakeholders who often know better than we do about what the

actual needs and the specific needs in each of the, and all of the Member States.

Maybe I just wanted to say one word because we have heard quite some, I would say, mixed feedback about what the plans have done for inclusiveness and especially for persons with disabilities.

And I want to say, it's not something that surprises me and it's not something that will be surprising for the Commission in general. We have actually adopted for each of the plans, an assessment with a digital document about what we felt was good and not good.

Actually, we have lots of, for those plans, we have some mixed feelings as well about the level of taking into account these important issues.

And this is why, as I've said before, we try now to move and to look forward. And to look into the implementation of the measures.

And we know what the plans are, and for most of them, they are now final in the sense that the overall planning is there.

But implementation is everything. So, implementation is everything, and for most of the plans, we have actually in the Member States management committees or committees, however they are called, which is really in charge of following the plans and the way they are managed.

And in these management committees, stakeholders are represented. We always encourage stakeholders in this case, disability associations or all organizations from Civil Society which want to have said to actually get in contact with international authorities, to try to find out what these management committees are about, how they function, how to get involved in their work.

Because this is where inference may be achieved and where you could achieve results on the ground. That would be the very targeted advice I would give to stakeholders and it's not an advice I give only to stakeholders.

It's the advice that the Commission gives to all Member States and Inmaculada, kindly pointed me to the guidance that was published and it's something I didn't mention in my presentation but it's very important. We have given guidance to Member States on what we see as a good way of dealing with notable government issues and part of this is to involve stakeholders at the national level in the implementation.

So, Member States are encouraged from our side. We also try to ask stakeholders to go from their sides and we hope that there will be an inclusive process in the implementation. We know it's not always easy. We know it's not always perfect. But one can only try and do more.

And maybe one other element which I heard several times today is the aspect of data. P in and the need to achieve more disaggregated data. This is something which we have also pushed

Member States, and this is something, not only in the Facility, but more broadly, to something that is becoming more and more crucial in many EU policies and on which I think we should continue to encourage Member States to make significant efforts.

Because, indeed, that is something that we find difficult in our data work and I'm sure you have the same experience. The lack, sometimes, of such disaggregated data and it is something essential if we want to go even further in the future. So, one more element to take into account. I think that it was mentioning digital education. While digital education is something that is in most of the recovery plans now to digital education also accessible and inclusive. We will need to get Member States really aware of the problems and we need them to take into account the views of stakeholders.

So, once again, another call for you all to get involved with your Member States. The Commission is also always happy to receive feedback and the Commission engages stakeholders in many different fora. You have heard Inmaculada, who is the expert in the Commission, about the disability issues. But we are always happy to hear your views and we encourage you to really get involved also at national level.

Thanks.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Félix, thank you so much. And it was great to hear you mention a few very specific steps that Member States can take and others as well. Jeremy, maybe next from you from an industry perspective, as well.

Actionable next steps of how Member State government should be focusing when we get to this implementation stage?

>> JEREMY ROLLISON: My answer is similar to Alvaro's. I think he laid that out quite clearly and Félix as well.

I think there's an awareness angle that everyone has a responsibility to play here. Whether it's DPOs, industry, communities locally, it's national governments. There is an exchange of this. These plans are, of course, they're public. You can see the details. I think the Commission has already highlighted some of the best practice examples kind of put more responsibility on them to continue to do that when you see these monies being used the way they were intended and meeting the criteria.

You know, we should be taking that out and highlighting it. So, I think DPOs and others certainly have a role to play there. One of the things that Alvaro said, we talk a lot about skills. As Félix said, that is a big part of the plans particularly from the educational side of things.

We could put it into a context, a lot of context, there's also skills in terms of developing skills. I think the train the trainer concept comes up a lot here as well.

It's learning more about what the needs of those communities actually are. Whether you're doing that with of DPOs and others directly from those in the community.

I think that's kind of one of the important things. I think explicitly the Commission has done a good job prioritizing where recovery monies are meant to be placed.

There's still a margin of maneuver for Member States to, and that's appropriate, right? And I think it's just on this accessibility angle and as Félix recognized and as we started out with the outset, there is a margin of maneuver for Member States to tick their digital boxes or tick their education boxes and make sure the plans are doing that and there just needs to be a more powerful reminder of the importance of that inclusion criteria as well. Being as inclusive as possible without any pun intended there.

It's more making sure that when we think about inclusion, we're not just thinking about some of the graphic communities that were displaced in the pandemic, but also thinking about some of those populations in particular, not just from particular professions or particular sectors that are transformed in ways that are never going to be like before. Even if I think about the sustainability context. Renewable energies. Move away from that, think about inclusion more explicitly in the context of persons with disabilities.

Actually, making sure that there's dialogue organizations who can talk more about the needs. And I'm not even talking about digital, in this context, you know, there's still plenty of monies available that don't need to have any digital development to them. In Microsoft, we have an interest from digital, that's obvious.

I do think learning what the actual needs are and what skills are needed from an employment perspective, as Alvaro mentioned, I think that's going to be one of the most important steps.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Jeremy. It's always encouraging to hear such an alignment of actions from industries and Civil Society and governments.

We're a little bit over but Ima, I would absolutely love to hear from you any specific actionable steps that you would advise Member State governments to take as they implement these plans.

>> INMACULADA PLACENCIA-PORRERO: Okay. Thank you. I'll try to be brief because I'm very much aligned with many of the things that have been said today.

I would like to compliment the interventions by highlighting the role that legislation makes in the sense that, the Accessibility Act transposition deadline is in a couple of days.

So, I really hope that the national laws really make the difference because stakeholders, including industry, would be preparing to only put products and services in the market which are accessible.

You can extend beyond the Accessibility Act to require products and services, and this is really a very, very important element.

In relation to the training, the digital training, it is, indeed, dissention, but I really miss, and I hope that Member States will be able to react to the training in regular Universities, professional trainings, of digital professionals on accessibility.

This must be an essential element of their education. Also, involving persons with disabilities and the organization, we are doing that at the European level. We are financing, may your disability organizations be able to participate in the discussions at European level, the policy making and implementation of accessibility.

Transposing the standards and making sure that these standards are available also in national languages, so that the implementation can be facilitated is important. And challenge what I think is important. We've been talking today about the digital transformation and in that context, sustainability has been coming up.

But, when we look to the funds, the concept of sustainability is rarely linked to the concept of accessibility while we have social sustainability and accessibility as a key element of that.

Whether it is for the digital, whether it is for the built environment, we need to have that made achieved that in order to have a sustainable development, a sustainable Europe to create this sustainability, accessibility must be seen in clearly in the agenda.

Otherwise, we will not be able to get it. And my last point is to say that when we talk about digital, often, we talk about websites. We talk about some digital services. But, more and more, we will see, and we are seeing, already, the inclusion of digital elements in the built environment, digital elements in transport as an inherent part of their work.

Realtime text travel information. We're talking about environmental controllers, and they all have a user interface that needs to be accessible. So, until we break the silos between, and this is what the Member States can do, between the different sectors, the ICT sectors needs to permeate the built environment.

They need to permeate the transport environment also in accessibility so that we really have these general accessibility experience that is well integrated at the services so that the user at the end is served.

So, a couple of additional comments to what the others have said. Thank you.

>> JAMES THURSTON: Thank you so much, Ima. Thank all of you. We're a little bit over so I'll be brief in winding things down here. I'd like to thank all of the speakers for their leadership and also for really being so generous and sharing your perspectives and insights.

Certainly, thank our G3ict staff Yulia and Bela but also our partners in EDF and from Microsoft for this ongoing discussion around procurement and inclusion accessibility.

All the participants who signed up and joined, thanks to all of you. Hopefully, you found some actionable steps to take back to your countries as they began to implement their strategies. G3ict will be making a recording of this discussion available very shortly. Then finally, I absolutely want to thank our sign language interpreters and the captioner for helping us make this discussion today as accessible as possible.

Again, thank you all very much. Please do enjoy the rest of your day.

(Session was concluded at 10:37 AM CT)

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