'ICT is not an end in itself'

The societal dimension of ICT was the centre of attention at the 'Information technology for European advancement (ITEA 2) symposium 2007'. At the annual event on 18 and 19 October 2007 in Berlin, Germany, stakeholders from industry, politics and academia discussed what ICT can contribute to global challenges such as the ageing society, the digital divide, climate change, security and healthcare.

'ICT is not an end in itself, but helps meet major challenges,' says Rudolf Haggenmüller, Chairman of ITEA 2. However, decision-makers seem to be losing interest in ICT, he adds. 'We as ICT stakeholders have to make clear that we provide key solutions to major societal problems not only in Europe, but in developing countries too.'

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An increased investment in R & D in ICTs is essential to boost innovation, growth and jobs creation, agrees Rosalie Zobel, Director of the ICT Components & Systems Unit of the European Commission's Information Society and Media DG. 'Half of the productivity growth over the last 20 years has been shown by the OECD and others to be due to the use of ICT in all sectors of society and also through the development of ICT industries themselves. So, it is a major contributing factor to the competitiveness of Europe.'

Under FP7, the EU will invest just over EUR 2 billion in ICT themes in the first two years of the programme alone, making ICT one of FP7's key areas for research and technological development (RTD). But be it at EU or national level, there is currently more money available than good ideas for projects, Mr Haggenmüller thinks.

However, every funding programme has its weakness, he says. In the case of EU research grants, for instance, 'the problem is that administrators instead of scientists define research topics'.

ITEA 2 is a Eureka cluster. Eureka is an intergovernmental initiative and its clusters, like those funded by the EU, involve research institutes and companies from various countries. Under Eureka, every project partner must apply for funding at national level,

having to abide by different rules and meet different deadlines, Mr Haggenmüller points out. 'As a result, we lose time from labelling to project start due to lack of synchronisation of national priorities and funding decisions.' The EU's joint technology initiatives (JTIs) are intended to solve this problem, Mr Haggenmüller knows. But he doubts their ability to save time and get projects started more quickly.

Generally speaking, Europe is too hesitant to pick up new trends and developments. 'Europeans always want proof that an idea is going to be a success,' says Mr Haggenmüller. As a result, they lag behind the United States and India. In order for Europe to be able to compete with them, he feels that an effective instrument is needed to counterbalance the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT).

Mr Haggenmüller therefore welcomes the idea of a European Institute of Technology (EIT), which — from his point of view — should incorporate a 'faculty' exclusively dedicated to ICT. 'IT-specific architectures and standards are not created by chance,' he says. 'Considering the fact that ICT is

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responsible for 80 to 90 % of innovations in some areas, I do indeed think that we need a "Knowledge and innovation community" (KIC) devoted to ICT.'

ITEA 2 is a strategic pan-European programme coordinating precompetitive R & D in embedded and distributed software. As part of the Eureka strategic cluster programme, ITEA's task is to link finance, technology and software engineering at European level. In 2007 alone, 45 projects are underway under the aegis of ITEA 2, investigating the use of sensors for remote monitoring of patients, new standards in entertainment technology or interfaces for facilitating joint product design.

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