

The Digital Divide



Left:
Michael G. Tutty (left), Vice-President of the European Investment Bank, and Claudio Mastracci (right), ESA's Director of the EU and Industrial Programmes per interim

Below:
Martin Nolan, Kerry County Manager (left), Mr Dermot Ahern, Irish Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (centre), and Councillor Annette McNamara, President of the EDUC Commission (right)



- The Role of Broadband Networks in Securing Knowledge-Based Regions

The South West Regional Authority, in association with the European Union Committee of the Regions, hosted a major international conference on "Knowledge Based Regions in the Information Society - the Role of Broadband Technology in Securing a Vibrant eSociety", in Killarney, Ireland on 5/6 April.

This high-profile event on the EU Presidency Calendar was connected to the ESA-funded South West Broadband Project that looks at the potential and usability of alternative technology for providing broadband connectivity to rural areas, an issue that is of huge concern in many parts of Ireland and throughout the EU.

"Broadband is an infrastructure that can empower and revitalise rural communities, and Government policy should not be contributing to reinforcing a digital divide that commercial market operators have helped create," stated the Irish Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Dermot Ahern, at the beginning of the conference. ***"Since becoming Minister, I have consistently held the view that the key ingredients for success in broadband are the 'three Cs' of cost, choice and competition."***

Claudio Mastracci, Director of EU and Industrial Programmes at ESA, emphasised the importance of space technology in bridging the digital divide, saying: ***"Satellites surely can offer cost effective and efficient solutions. Thanks to the interesting projects done jointly with ESA, this can already be experienced in rural areas of Ireland."***

Fulvio Sansone, Secretary-General of the European Satellite Operators Association (ESOA) highlighted the fact that satellite broadband is already a reality in Europe for SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) and corporate entities. The

main barriers to wider satellite broadband deployment, however, are delays and uncertainties concerning regulations, the high costs for the consumer, and the fact that the user is not always aware of satellite broadband and its benefits.

The conference, which was opened by Annette McNamara, Chair of CoR's Commission for Culture and Education, brought together some 300 delegates, including Michael G. Tutty, Vice-President of the European Investment Bank, Mike Buhagiar of ESAT BT, and Jean-Bernhard Benhaïem of the EC's Directorate-General Regio. The varied speakers presented different ways of providing access to affordable, reliable and sustainable broadband connectivity in the light of new applications, hardware and user types.

The digital divide has been addressed in the White Paper on European Space Policy as a major priority, with the key question: How can space contribute to solving this problem? In fact, space solutions can respond to the needs in areas with an obsolete or no communication ground infrastructure. They provide services beyond national borders. ESA is currently analysing the costs and benefits of these solutions. Preparatory activities are to be initiated in mid-2004 for a programme proposal to be tabled at the ESA Ministerial Conference in mid-2005.