

GAIA GLOBAL: A Digital Cities Project

The concept of Digital Cities is used to qualify the rapid growth of information and communication technologies that is currently transforming advanced industrial cities as well as to designate on-line services managed by local government, businesses, citizens or users and which either

present local content or use the urban metaphor to facilitate user understanding (Bastelaer and Lobet-Maris, 1999). Digital cities seem to include on its definition both the notions of community and city as well as the appearance of increase available and easy to access digital information.

The GAIA GLOBAL Digital City Initiative

Gaia Global is a three-year project sponsored by the Portugal Digital Initiative, within the Information Society operation program framework. It provides a digital city counterpart for Vila Nova de Gaia, a Portuguese town with around 288.000 inhabitants, considering 2001 figures.

The project promotes the investment on people, actions and organisation skills:

- eases and promotes citizen access for individuals and organisations no matter they are local citizens or people passing by Gaia, to information, goods and services from the region. Gaia Global acts as an information intermediary hub
- following the notion of *infomediaries* reported by (Kotklin, 2001);
- promote the communication between local authorities and citizens. This impacts and reinforces democracy and provides universal information access, that in turn, may increase citizens life quality by offering better services - a typical e-government concern (Gronlund, 2002);
- foster the local economy by promoting the use of electronic commerce practices. In particular, allow the necessary conditions for a cultural and organisational revolution concerning processes and practices;

The Gaia Global project follows the digital cities concept. Its main motivation is to propose a social approach to link the current physical place and its community with a digital counterpart. Also to extend it to support the community interaction with other people been in Vila Nova de Gaia or outside the city limits, trying to offer support for people interaction anywhere, anytime, and anyplace.

The Gaia Global project is focused in offering an environment to increase involvement of the local population and other people interacting with Gaia related and/or based activities. As a result, Gaia Global adopts a social approach to

the digital cities concept where technology follows information needs and information just exists to support people interaction. The Gaia Global slogan is "Gaia Global, a cup of ideas". This reinforces the role that innovation (both technology and its applications) and people participation may have in all aspects of the Gaia Global project. The Gaia Global environment does not propose an alternative place or a digital place to be there, but an integrated and linked new medium to foster people interaction.

Gaia Global objectives

The Gaia Global project seeks to offer the following benefits:

- Reinforces the external visibility of Vila Nova de Gaia and its surroundings;
- Influences the areas where improvement is needed, such as health, education and environment;
- Creates the conditions to increase investment in the local region, by providing an updated and efficient technological infrastructure;
- Contributes to the increase to the citizen quality life, and to the citizenship levels of participation.

The intervention areas are: information and local administration services; education; health; commerce and industry, and e-government.

Considering the need to provide clear guidelines to support the coherence and global integration of efforts within the Gaia Global project, each of the intervention area must be enhanced and structured in terms of its main contributions and expected outcomes.

Information and local administration services: democratise and decentralise access to local administration services and other public services, within the region. Foster the use of electronic communication facilities as the means for improving the local administration service quality and diminish the distance between people and local administration.

Education: the skilled use of information technologies is considered as cru-

cial as core competencies that modern human resources must possess. The training and day to day use of such technologies must include every citizen considering both its scholar and professional life. Also, integration of information and communication technologies must be made during scholar life from early stages. The need to guarantee lifelong learning justifies efforts for updating skills. Technologies such as distance education and e-learning facilities must be used and promoted;

Health: foster medicine practice and availability of distance diagnose facilities as means to deal with cost and scale issues concerning human and technical resources involved in health services. Use telemedicine facilities to increase proximity between health professionals and patients, and take advantage of information technologies to offer faster and proximity health services; will foster availability and quality. Additionally, quality health services results also from both the increase of using information technologies and from health professionals' continuous education;

Commerce and industry: the e-commerce phenomena justifies the need to invest in new ways of doing business by taking advantage of information and communication technologies (this is important taking into consideration the actual situation of traditional commerce and industry that face the concurrence of new forms doing business). Of importance it is also the opportunity to adapt existent enterprises and create new ones within the context of the digital economy. There is also an opportunity to foster the entrepreneurial sector in Gaia by introducing some stimulus actions and involving local enterprises in the tool development and content creation to Gaia Global projects;

E-government: offering information and services access to local administration as the use of the World Wide Web Gaia portal (<http://www.cm-gaia.pt>);

Environment, Life quality and cultural heritage:

introducing new information and communication technologies can lead the way to increase life quality as is the case of applications in transportation, traffic, security, and in the diffusion of the local extensive cultural heritage.

Sports and entertainment:

The Gaia Global project defends that information and communication technology must help to democratise the access to the local offer concerning sports and entertainment, contributing the development of individuals in the region.

The Gaia Global main motivation is to propose a social approach to link the current physical place and its community with a digital counterpart and ex-

tend it to support the community interaction with also other people been in Vila Nova de Gaia or outside the city limits, trying to offer support for people interaction anywhere, anytime, and anyplace. As proposed by Barnatt, within borderless economies, there is a need to be “globally local and locally global” (Eger, 1997). The replacing of the word digital by global reinforces the care for a social approach and the effort to provide clues regarding that the project is not about technology neither computers, but about how people can take advantage of new forms of performing their day to day activities with less cost in time and effort. Even with such great prospects and potential high rewards we need to be prepared to consider risks. In

fact, initiatives as the ones proposed by digital cities are very ambitious and need to consider the natural difficulties resulting from dealing with people, information and integration services among different organisations, each one with their own interests (many times, not compatible).

MORE INFO

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The Vysocina Region supports broadband and public Internet

In the April issue of eris@ newsletter you could find general information about the ICT supporting activities done by the Vysocina Region. Vysocina, one of 15 regions in Czech republic, has a great responsibility for regional

development within its area and region's representatives are aware of strong influence of the modern ICT technologies on life quality of the citizens and business development.

Main task for now is to create strong ICT infrastructure with long lifetime period as a basis, which would be electronic services of public authorities operate on. We decided to build Vysocina backbone network called ROWANet (rowan is one of Vysocina symbols) based on optic fibres and by CWDM (multiplex) technology we are able to fulfil our ideas about this network potential by. ROWANet project was prepared for a 1 year period and we tried to find best way to create such an extensive project.

We already had an experience from creating Jihlava city metropolitan network (Jihlava city is a capital of the Vysocina region), which has interconnected 22 public organizations established by the



region (schools, hospital, ambulance service, museum, gallery etc.), but ROWANet was projected as a network of 150 km optic fibres, which goes through 7 big towns and 3 villages. The idea is again to interconnect public administration subjects and organizations established by the region and to bring them cheaper telecommunication and

data services. As there is possibility for the private telecommunication operators to own a part of the optic cable (on which ROWANet operates) they are able to come to the underdeveloped areas to offer their services. Anyway, ROWANet has indirect influence on the quality of services for citizens (cheaper Internet connection) and on telecommunication market and competition as well.

Since Czech republic became the EU member in May 2004, there a great chance was opened - to use EU Structural Funds to finance the ROWANet project. We applied for an ERDF co-financing in July 2005 and became successful. ROWANet is first ICT project managed by ICT department of the Vysocina Regional Authority, which is partially financed by region, national budget and ERDF sources. Within the project we also create 10 public Internet access points (Wi-Fi hot-spots) for citizens, which will be placed in every municipality connected to ROWANet. The project deadline was fixed by January 2006. Except this activity Vysocina Region supports the projects prepared by other subjects, mainly municipali-



ties, by the Vysocina Fund – financial tool to co-finance project within the region such as metropolitan networks, free internet, ICT equipment and GIS solutions. We don't forget need for ICT and new technologies promotion so every year we organize conferences, workshops, we support educational activities and of course help project coordinators by giving best practices.

MORE INFO

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