

Welcome address of President Barroso to the opening of the European Launch Event on
Public Procurement and Accessibility to the Built Environment

Accessibility used traditionally to be regarded as an “add-on” feature catering to specific needs of a limited group of people – wheelchair users, visually or hearing impaired persons. Additionally, the compliance costs for businesses and public services linked to accessible built environment were frequently overestimated, given the size of our economies. But many changes have taken place in our society, which is coming to terms with its diversity and starting to appreciate it.

We all experience on occasion difficulties finding a location or accessing it due to the inconvenient architectural design of a building or an unsuitable access road. Our environment, especially in large cities, contains barriers for all people, but particularly for those with a disability. A large part of the built environment is composed of work places. Improving their accessibility opens up new possibilities of employment for people with disabilities and helps to avoid early retirement of older workers. At the same time, it improves the working environment for every worker, which results in an increase of productivity and quality at work. The public accessing these buildings will find them more user friendly, which will contribute positively to the businesses or public service. We all want to use, work and live in buildings which are designed to be safe, healthy and convenient. Accessibility is therefore everything but a minority issue.

If we base our society on diversity and equal rights, we need to provide all citizens with the means to pursue an active social and economic life. An accessible built environment is a key element of such inclusive society, based on non-discrimination. Accessibility is thus an intrinsic part of the strategy launched at the Lisbon Summit, in March 2000, that aims to foster growth, employment and social cohesion. We want a knowledge-based society, which offers new possibilities for reducing social exclusion, both by creating the economic conditions for greater prosperity and by opening new ways of participating in society.

An effective legal framework is crucial in seeking to achieve accessibility for all. Public authorities have a particular responsibility in setting “best practice” on accessibility. Public authorities spend each year around 1500 billion € – or 16% of GDP of the EU on purchasing goods and services. This gives to public purchasers considerable market power, which can trigger a decisive shift in attitudes towards accessibility for all requirements. The European institutions have worked together to introduce the “access for all” principle into European public procurement legislation. The new “legislative package” on public procurement, to be implemented by Member States by the end of January 2006, enables contracting authorities to define technical specifications, taking into account accessibility criteria for people with disabilities and design for all users. This is a major change in public procurement legislation, which clearly responds to today’s needs of our society.

The European Commission is a strong supporter of this launch event, which will certainly contribute to raising the awareness of public purchasers of the new possibilities given to them by the European legislation. It will be now up to them to make the best use of the legal provisions and their involvement will be necessary to deliver real progress. I truly hope that the example of European public procurement will soon show that competitiveness in Europe goes hand in hand with social inclusion and sustainability.