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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**Interim evaluation of the multi-annual Union programme on protecting children using
the Internet and other communication technologies.**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This communication concerns the interim evaluation of the Safer Internet Programme 2009-2013, in this communication referred to as "the programme". The Technopolis Group was given the assignment to carry out the evaluation. The main objective of the evaluation has been to assess the programme concerning relevance, effectiveness and efficiency in addition to broader impacts and sustainability based on evidence from questionnaires, consultations with stakeholders and annual reports.

The main objectives of the programme are to:

- Increase public awareness
- Provide the public with a network of contact points for reporting illegal and harmful content and conduct, in particular on child abuse material, grooming and cyber bullying.
- Foster self-regulatory initiatives in this field and involve children in creating a safer online environment.
- Establish a knowledge base on new trends in the use of online technologies and their consequences for children's lives.

Compared to the earlier programmes the general scope of the current programme has been extended to include emerging online technologies, the covering of harmful contact and conduct (like grooming and cyber-bullying) and it aims at establishing a knowledge base within this field.

The main mechanism for implementing the programme is the co-financing of projects selected on the basis of public calls for proposals. This has resulted in a wide range of projects being funded under the various action lines, complemented by non-funded activities as appropriate. The projects aim at creating a safer online environment for young people and the non-funded initiatives range from supporting Safer Internet Day, organizing Safer Internet Forum, promotion and support of industry self-regulation and co-operating at the international level with other relevant organizations.

As part of its actions the programme co-funds Safer Internet Centres, which are central in the work to **raise awareness**.¹ The centres are present in all EU Member States as well as in Iceland, Norway and Russia. All Centres, apart from Portugal, operate helplines from which

¹ Safer Internet Centres:
http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/projects/centres/index_en.htm

parents and children can get advice on issues related to children's use of online technologies. The Centres and helplines belong to the INSAFE network.² In most countries Safer Internet Centres also include hotlines; their main task is to receive reports from the public about **illegal content online**. When illegal content is identified the hotline will refer this on to competent law enforcement agencies in the country and/or the Internet Service Provider and ask for content to be removed, or to a member of the International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE) network if the content is hosted in another country. The hotlines are coordinated by the INHOPE Association.³ **Knowledge enhancement** on young people's use of technology is a central aim for the work in the programme. The programme supports several research projects covering a range of topics and disciplines. In addition to raising the research profile of safer Internet related issues, developing knowledge through many relevant projects feeds into the knowledge base for all activities in the programme. The current knowledge enhancement projects include:

- The project **EU Kids Online II** (selected under the previous programme) aims to strengthen the knowledge base regarding children's and parent's experiences and practices of risk and safety in their use of the internet and new technologies in Europe. The project is the first to investigate the attitudes and actions towards online safety of both children and parents across most of the European Member States. The project builds on the previous EU Kids Online I, but has increased the number of participating countries from 21 to 25 countries.
- European **Online Grooming Project (POG)** (selected under the previous programme) aims to investigate victim targeting practices of offenders convicted of online grooming. POG is the first European research project that studies the characteristics and behaviour of offenders who have used the internet to target young victims. The project is a cooperation carried out by 6 partners representing four countries: United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium and Norway. The work includes a scoping study reviewing online groomer's case files. The project will provide reports of the research and policy literature from the partner countries in the project. In addition the project includes interviews with strategic stakeholders concerning the management and prevention of online grooming.
- **Risk taking Online Behaviour - Empowerment through Research and Training (ROBERT)** intends to make online interaction safe for children and young people by learning from experiences of online abuse processes and factors that make young people vulnerable as well as those that offer protection.⁴ Perpetrator's strategies in relation to grooming of children online are also explored along with developing an understanding of how abuse may develop in the online environment. Children and young people will be empowered in order for them to better protect themselves online. Groups of children perceived to be more at risk will specifically benefit from chances of improved self-protection.

Under the action for fighting against illegal content the programme co-funds initiatives to **support law enforcement bodies** in the fight against child sexual abuse material.

² European Network of Awareness Centres
<http://www.saferinternet.org/web/guest/home;jsessionid=CFCEC3A1AE9934CF71917E6C207ABB2C>

³ International Association of Internet Hotlines INHOPE <http://www.inhope.org/gns/home.aspx>

⁴ Risktaking Online Behaviour - Empowerment through Research and Training
<http://www.childcentre.info/robert/about-the-project/>

- **The FIVES project - Forensic Image and Video Examination Support** was selected under the previous programme and ran from 01/02/2009 until 31/01/2011. The aim of the project has been to develop new ICT tools tailored to investigating images and videos of child sexual abuse to enhance the possibilities the police have to handle large amount of seized equipment.
- **The INTERPOL – International Child Sexual Exploitation Image Database (ICSEDB)** is a project aimed at increasing the number of children identified and rescued from abuse. A central tool is sophisticated image comparison software that can make connections between victims and places. It also allows authorized users in the INTERPOL member countries to access the database directly and in real time. The aim is eventually to provide 30 additional countries with access to this system.

To ensure **involvement of civil society** the Safer Internet Centres set up national youth panels which they consult regularly. In October 2010 the INSAFE European Youth Panel gathered for the second time young people from 30 European countries. Their discussions about opinions and suggestions about online safety were fed into a wider debate during the Safer Internet Forum in 2010. Another way of involving civil society is the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online II (eNACSO) network. It is financed until 31/08/2012 and consists of European children's rights organisations engaged in online safety for children. The network promotes its joint strategies and recommendations for change to national, European and international decision-makers and other relevant stakeholders.

The programme also aims to make it easier to **use filtering software, content labelling and services**. A benchmarking study – SIP-Bench study – running from 2010 to 2012 provides a ranking list to assist European parents to choose the parental control tool that fits their needs. The first results were available in December 2010. The first SIP-Bench study (2006-2008) showed overall that tools improved and became easier to install over this three year period.

The Internet and mobile technologies develop at a fast pace and to be able to react quickly concerning new developments of children's use and risks **industry self-regulation** is important. The programme supports two self-regulation initiatives taken by the industry at the European level. A European Framework for safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children was signed by leading mobile operators and content providers in 2007. In 2009 major social networks active in Europe signed the Safer Social Networking Principles for the EU.

The programme supports **events and campaigns** such as the Safer Internet day and the Safer Internet Forum.

2. EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The evaluation covers the first part of the 2009-2013 Safer Internet Programme and the main focus is therefore to evaluate how the programme is evolving but the evaluation will also feed into recommendations for any follow-up initiative.

An evaluation of the programme at this stage, as an interim evaluation, gives an analysis of the relevance of the programme concerning its design, efficiency and effectiveness. In addition, it indicates the sustainability and impact the programme has had with a special emphasis on the coherence of the programme. To consider the **relevance** of the programme the evaluation addressed the following questions:

- Have the problems addressed by the Safer Internet Programme evolved?
- Have circumstances, technology, social or economic factors changed since the initiation of the programme?
- Are the focal activities and the target areas the most relevant and still relevant to achieve the programme's overall aim? Are the current objectives still relevant for the future?
- To what extent are the objectives relevant to Internet users, parents, teachers, children and the industry? Has there been an added value for the target groups?

The **efficiency** of the programme was evaluated according to the following questions:

- Has the implementation of the programme been satisfactory? Are procedures simple enough?
- Were the activities of the programme carried out efficiently and were they cost effective?
- Were the levels of funding and other available resources adequate?

To look at the **effectiveness** of the programme the following questions were addressed:

- How have the results of the programme contributed to a better protection of children on the Internet and in the broader digital environment?
- Has the programme made a difference? did it induce participants to undertake activities that would not have been carried out without the programme?
- Are there other activities that could achieve results more effectively? What are the main obstacles to and opportunities for enhanced programme effectiveness?

The **impact and sustainability** of the programme was addressed according to the following questions:

- Can any lessons be drawn from this assessment that can be used in the design and implementation of any follow-up programme?
- To what extent did the programme complement other EU programmes and initiatives so as to avoid duplication and maximise impact?
- Did the activities show likelihood of generating sustainable impacts?
- To what extent would positive changes induced by the programme have happened without any EU intervention?

Methodology for the evaluation

The evaluation work has been divided into three overlapping phases; inception phase, the collection/analysis phase and the interim evaluation/final report phase. The main data collection method comprised two online surveys; one project participant survey and one wider stakeholder survey. The questions in these surveys reflected the main evaluation questions. The surveys were complemented with consultations on a broader range of issues with 25 stakeholders representing project participants, industry, policy makers, other DGs and NGOs.

3. EVALUATION FINDINGS

The evaluation results are positive. They show that **the programme has evolved to keep up with the technological and sociological considerations** surrounding the safer use of the Internet by minors. It responds well to changing demands in the external environment as evidenced by the current emphasis on social media and cyber-bullying. However, to ensure the inclusion of new issues the programme needs to continue to explore new issues and have a long-term strategic vision.

The evaluation results further show that **the programme is influential** in relation to other national and international activities; literature, research and results from the programme are widely used and quoted. In addition, recommendations from the last programme evaluations have been broadly incorporated into the programme.

The programme was run efficiently. There are good levels of communication between the related EU programmes at policy level. The programme is also effective according to the evaluation. The achievements of the programme concerning the existence of hotlines, helplines and awareness centres in the majority of Member States are highlighted in the evaluation. The evaluation also concludes that the **current focus and structure of the programme is appropriate** and does not call for significant change in the next period. The support and funding from the programme is crucial for the projects to exist, especially considering the current economic constraints.

The overall picture of the programme is very positive; there is however room for improvements concerning some matters according to the evaluation findings. According to some stakeholders there still needs to be done further work to ensure that there is direct involvement of children.. The projects call for longer funding periods to ensure better continuity and periods of reflection. There is a need for the programme to keep up to date with technological advances – through market intelligence, knowledge enhancement projects and general knowledge exchange. The programme must also be able to follow the developments in national contexts concerning issues related to legislation. The risk with national budget cuts and subsequent change of priorities implies that there is a need to ensure that national and regional priorities are coherent with European priorities to maximise the effect in the time to come.

4. EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of recommendations have been identified through the interim evaluation in order to further the impact of future initiatives.

According to the recommendations concerning **relevance** the Safer Internet Programme should continue its efforts to ensure that it researches and funds the most pertinent activities for the protection of minors on the Internet. The programme should not broaden its objectives but maintain its current objectives. It is recommended to maintain a long-term strategic vision on the programme and its issues. The knowledge base can improve through creating links with key industry actors, international organisations, content providers and technology producers. Many links from existing stakeholders can be better exploited. Enhancement of children's participation and involvement in the programme should be considered; including methods, activities, arenas etc.

The **efficiency** of the programme could be improved through longer funding periods for the projects and fewer restrictions on the internal allocation of funds. It should further be considered to implement the programme jointly with other projects carried out by the Commission. The networks of hotlines, helplines and awareness centres should be further coordinated through joint events and working groups. The collaboration of INHOPE and INSAFE should be further encouraged. INTERPOL is positive towards further cooperation with Safer Internet projects.

Concerning **effectiveness** it will be advisable to increase awareness of the work of the Safer Internet Programme to address a potential reduction in national/regional political support. The programme should also look at measures to increase more consistent commitment from the industry and increase debate about legal issues surrounding the protection of minors. In relation to international networking, it is recommended that enlargement countries and Russia / South East Europe are involved both in contributing to the evidence base and as receivers of knowledge /best practices from experienced stakeholders. The programme should ensure that the knowledge base is improved through research contributions shaped and informed by the growing level of information already published. The annual reports of the projects should be improved concerning outcomes and impacts. The programme should also ensure that the knowledge reaches further into schools and curricula.

The evaluation report suggests some initiatives for improving the **impact and sustainability** of the programme. Firstly, it can be advisable to consider setting up two types of forum; one to discuss technology issues arising in relation to the programme and its objectives; and another to discuss relevant legislative issues arising in the individual countries. Secondly, it is suggested to develop further indicators for measuring the impact of awareness-raising activities. The programme should also enhance the opportunities for projects funded by different programmes of the Commission to exchange knowledge and discuss common issues.

5. COMMISSION COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The interim evaluation confirms that the activities and initiatives of the Safer Internet Programme are a success according to the indicators of the evaluation. That the programme succeeded to evolve according to the fast changing nature of the domain including both technological and sociological considerations is especially positive.

The Commission takes full note of the findings and will take the recommendations into account in ongoing and future activities and strategies of the programme.

The Commission invites the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions to:

- (1) Take note that the programme has been successfully implemented at mid term.;
- (2) Assist the Commission in its work to increase visibility, stimulate continued dialogue and support the joining of actors and stakeholders in the field of Safer Internet.