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Born accessibility as a way towards normalisation and inclusion of all citizens in a democratic and participatory society

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The United Nations is leading the quest for fairness and equal opportunities that embraces human diversity to ensure that everybody can exercise their freedom of expression and to fully participate in the Information Society. To this aim two treaties have been developed in the 21st century towards fulfilling universal human rights and promoting fundamental freedoms. The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR](#) (1996) is the first. Its deployment guarantees access to any place or service intended for use by the general public. Denial of access constitutes a discriminatory act, regardless whether the perpetrator is a public or private entity. The right of access was further developed as a Human Right by the UN in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD](#) in 2006. These two UN conventions set up the background from where to develop concrete measures by both the EU and all its countries who ratified the Conventions and the Optional Protocol.

In Europe the response came with the EC Directive [2006/54/EC](#) of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation. Provisions are described among: individuals, of opportunities for education, training, employment, career development and the exercise of power without their being disadvantaged on the basis of their disability, sex, race, language, religion, economic or family situation, etc.

This Directive was followed by the Commission standardisation mandate [M/473](#) in 2010.

Each individual user has their own profile of needs, characteristics, capabilities, and preferences. This fact needs to be taken into account when developing mainstream products and services. In particular, to ensure access for persons with disabilities on equal basis with others accessibility of products and services is essential. A Design for All approach acknowledges these variations and aims at meeting their requirements to the greatest extent possible in order to achieve accessible products and services.

The answer to the mandate was the recently published European Standard [EN 17161](#) (2019) 'Design for All - Accessibility following a Design for All approach in products, goods and services - Extending the range of users'. This European standard specifies requirements to design, develop and provide products, goods and services that can be accessed, understood and used by the widest range of users including persons with disabilities. This is the background from where to develop any accessibility service in the 21st century aiming at inclusion, personalization, and all members of society.

The EU responded to the UN CRPD with specific legislation regarding accessibility. In 2019 the [European Accessibility Act](#) was approved, which along the [2016 Web Accessibility Directive](#), the [2018 European Electronic Communication Code](#) and the [2018 Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#), offer the legal

context for accessibility in Europe in the foreseeable future. In addition to the European Standard EN17161 there is also a harmonised EU standard for accessible technologies: the [EN301549](#) (version 3.1.1.: 2019). Accordingly, on the one hand we have a fully displayed ambitious legislation towards Human Right compliance in Europe, and on the other hand we have an ever-evolving media landscape which must become accessible to fulfil the EU standards EN301549 and EN17161. These two EN standards secure the concepts of Universal Design, and also Born Accessible.

EU has also decided to raise awareness on the standards by funding a programme that enables researchers to set up their interdisciplinary research networks in Europe and beyond. It provides funds for organising conferences, meetings, training schools, short scientific exchanges or other networking activities in a wide range of scientific topics. The new LEAD ME action will create a collaborative environment where people and ideas can grow around the central issue of Media Accessibility.

[LEAD-ME](#) started on October 1st and will run for 4 years. During the Kick Off meeting representatives from 24 EU countries voted Pilar Orero of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain) as chair, and Robin Ribback from IPmedia (Germany) as vice chair.

LEAD-ME aims to help all stakeholders in the field of Media Accessibility and cross-cutting topics (e.g. AI and Interactive Technologies) in Europe to meet the legal milestones requested by the recently passed European legislation. Researchers, engineers, scholars as well as businesses and policy makers will be empowered by LEAD-ME with a common and unique platform which, during the next 48 months, will collect, create, share, and disseminate innovative technologies and solutions, best practices and guidelines, and promote them. Furthermore, it will contribute towards existing and new standards on Media Accessibility among 28 European or associated countries.

To do so, the LEAD-ME network will make use of the specific tools of the COST Action: meetings and working group meetings; educational institutes, short-term scientific missions; dissemination activities. LEAD-ME will boost a cultural change and the creation of a new mindset when designing tools for professional and private activities for all European citizens of all abilities and disabilities. This COST Action is strongly needed to avoid further fragmentation in the European accessibility scene, challenging the European Single Digital Market idea. The uneven take-up in Europe is the direct result of the complex nature of Media, the background technology involved, the fast-changing technology and business models, and the wealth of EU languages. This counts for both the market and research.