

Strategy Paper 2020-2022

Mission

EASTIN – the Global Assistive Technology Information Network – aims to be the leading information system on assistive technology¹ worldwide, placing comprehensive and accurate information within the reach of every citizen.

The EASTIN information system (www.eastin.eu) is operated by the partner Organizations of the EASTIN Association, each of them running an established national information system on assistive technology in its Country.

The EASTIN system aggregates information from all partner's national systems and provides on the EASTIN website – in many languages, and in a user-friendly and accessible manner – a comprehensive overview of the assistive technology products available worldwide, including technical details of each product and related helpful information (companies, projects, service providers, articles, case descriptions, ideas, etc.). It also provides access to further information in the national information system offering guidance for appropriate choices.

On the EASTIN website, any interested visitors can find useful information for their everyday life or work: end-users of assistive technology, such as people with disabilities and their families; professionals in health and social services; manufacturers and suppliers of assistive products; researchers and technicians; policy-makers and public agencies involved in assistive technology provision.

The EASTIN network also includes Affiliates and National Contact Organisations in many other countries or linguistic regions. They are responsible for keeping the website up-to-date in each language and are prepared to answer questions posted by people through the website in relation to assistive technology.

Vision

The vision pursued by the EASTIN association is that every citizen has ready access to high quality and detailed information about assistive technology, in their languages.

By raising awareness and disseminating information and knowledge, the association intends to contribute to the empowerment of people with disabilities, to support independence, choice and control in relation to assistive technology, as mandated by the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities²; it also intends to support the work of professionals involved in the disability field.

By providing a comprehensive and detailed overview of the assistive technology market – independent of commercial interests and displayed according to common standards – it makes it easier for companies involved in development, manufacturing and supply of assistive technology to make their products known by the people who may need them.

By facilitating exchange of knowledge and experience on how assistive technology provision is organised in the various Countries, it helps policy makers to make informed choices and supports the advancement of service delivery systems throughout the world.

¹ The term “Assistive Technology” is meant to indicate any goods or service with technological content which is useful to compensate for certain functional limitations of people with disabilities in everyday life activities and in their involvement at work, in school and in social life. The WHO (World Health Organization, 2016) official definition is “application of organized knowledge and skills related to assistive products, including systems and services”, while an “assistive product” is “any external product (including devices, equipment, instruments or software), especially produced or generally available, the primary purpose of which is to maintain or improve an individual's functioning and independence, and thereby promote their well-being”.

² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

The EASTIN association also intends to be the forum where the member Organisations share their expertise, help each other to continuously improve the quality of the service provided in their Countries through their national information systems, offer advice and support to members who wish to create their own national information systems where they don't exist yet, and develop strategies to ensure their sustainability.

The EASTIN partners are committed to keep their national information systems and the EASTIN website at the leading edge of information technology and knowledge engineering, so as to increase web visibility, ensure accessibility, facilitate efficient and user-friendly retrieval of the appropriate information that meets the user's needs.

Within the EASTIN association, the member Organisations have also the opportunity to initiate collaborative projects in the assistive technology area, and to share experiences and knowledge to contribute to the development of national policies.

Organisation

The EASTIN Association was established in December 2006, as a result of a European project carried out by an international Consortium³ led by the Don Gnocchi Foundation (Milano, Italy) and partially funded by the European Commission within the **eTen** programme⁴. The European Commission also contributed to further major developments of the EASTIN system within the **CIP ICT-PSP**⁵ programme, through projects such as the **EASTIN-CL** and the **ETNA** projects.

It is a non-for-profit Organisation, with registered seat in Milano, Italy. Its member Organisations include **Partners**, **Affiliates** and **National Contacts**. The updated full list is available on <http://www.eastin.eu/en/Partners/Index>.

Partners are the core members of the Association: they run well established and publicly recognized nation-wide information system in their countries, and make their contents available to the EASTIN system through proper software interfaces (web services).

Affiliates have no information system connected to the EASTIN system; however, they collaborate to enrich the contents and are responsible for various linguistic layers of the EASTIN website.

National Contacts are organizations from other countries where the Association has no Partner or Affiliate yet.

The network may also include **External Partners**, i.e. organizations that run widely recognized international thematic databases connected to the EASTIN search engine, to contribute to increase information quality and coverage of the EASTIN information system⁶.

The governing Body of the EASTIN Association is the **EASTIN Assembly**, composed of one representative appointed by each **Partner** Organisations. For the current affairs, the Assembly appoints a **Board of Directors**, which includes the President, the Vice-President and a third Board Member.

The core funding is ensured by a membership fee paid by each **Partner** and each **Affiliate** every year.

³ Fondazione Don Carlo Gnocchi Onlus (Italy); Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln (Germany); Danish Centre for Assistive Technology (Denmark); Disabled Living Foundation (United Kingdom); Ceapat (Spain); IRV (The Netherlands)

⁴ eTEN (Deploying Trans-European e-Services for all) was a programme of the European Commission facilitating the deployment of trans-European telecommunications networks services on the European market. Within eTEN, the EASTIN project was partially funded as a "market validation" project; it led to the harmonization of the national information systems of the six Consortium members, and their integration through a purposely developed web engine – the EASTIN website.

⁵ CIP stands for "Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme". It included three operational programmes, one of them being the ICT-PSP (The Information Communication Technologies Policy Support Programme). Within ICT-PSP, EASTIN-CL (Crosslingual and multimodal Search in a Portal for Support of Assisted Living, led by Linguatex GmbH, Germany) was a "Pilot type B" project, which helped improve the linguistic intelligence of the EASTIN system. ETNA (European Thematic Network on Assistive Information Technology, led by Fondazione Don Gnocchi, Italy) was a large Thematic Network involving 23 partners from 13 EU Countries, which helped strengthen the EASTIN network and extend the abilities of the EASTIN website and search engine to cope with complex AT information, especially in relation to ICT products.

⁶ Currently no organization is participating in the network as External Partner. In 2011-2003 two international databases specialising in IT assistive technology participated within the framework of EU-funded research and innovation projects.

Who can join the EASTIN network

Any Organization who shares the EASTIN mission and vision, and has a nationally acknowledged role in its country in providing assistive technology information to all citizens, may apply to join the EASTIN network. Only one Organization per country (or linguistic region within a Country) is admitted. Organizations who wish to apply – whether as partners or affiliates of national contacts – should send an application to the EASTIN Association eastinassociation@gmail.com; the application will be examined by the Assembly of Partners, who decides about acceptance.

The databases connected to the EASTIN search engine

The EASTIN system is currently based on the data coming from **seven national databases**, operated by the **four founding members** of the EASTIN Association (from Italy, Denmark, Germany, UK) plus **three organizations** that joined later (from Belgium, France and Australia):

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| Italy | Fondazione Don Carlo Gnocchi Onlus , based in Milano, responsible for the national information system “Portale SIVA” (www.portale.siva.it) |
| Denmark | Socialstyrelsen (National Board of Social Services, which was merged with the former Danish Centre for Assistive Technology), based in Odense, responsible for the national information system “Hjælpemiddelbasen” or “AssistData” (www.hmi-basen.dk); |
| Germany | Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln , based in Köln, responsible for the national information system “REHADAT” (www.rehadat.de); |
| UK | Disabled Living Foundation , based in London, responsible for the national information system “DLF-data” (www.dlf.org.uk); |
| Belgium | VAPH (Flemish Agency for Disabled Persons), based in Brussels, responsible for the national information system “Vlibank” (www.vlibank.be) |
| France | Hacovie , based in Lille, responsible for the national information system “Handicat” (www.handicat.com) |
| Australia | Assistive Technology Australia , based in Blacktown NSW, responsible for the national information system “Assistive Technology Australia” (https://at-aust.org/) |

History

The EASTIN network started in 2006, as the result of a collaborative project (partially funded by the European Commission) carried out by six Institutions based in the European Union. The initial objective was to provide comprehensive, accurate and unbiased information on AT products available in the European market to all citizens and stakeholders needing it. The network’s name still reflects its original perspective, as the acronym “EASTIN” initially stands for “European Assistive Technology Information Network”.

More recently, the network evolved from a European to a **global** perspective, with the ambition to become gradually the worldwide AT information hub. The original acronym was maintained, as it had become in the years an internationally well-known brand; now the network identifies itself as **EASTIN – The Global Assistive Technology Information Network**.

Since its foundation, the EASTIN Association has continuously worked at providing contents and improving the EASTIN website and its complex search engines. The system has been substantially re-engineered several times so far, in order to keep the pace of information technology advancement.

At the same time, all partner Organisations that run national databases plugged to EASTIN have carried out substantial improvements in their information system, in order to adapt to changes occurred in their national health and social systems, keep the pace of technological development and fulfil the harmonisation requirements agreed within the EASTIN network. Reciprocal knowledge and continuous mutual exchange of expertise has greatly contributed to that.

National Contact Organisations – a strategic development initiated in 2010 – have been established in many Countries. Most of them are governmental agencies having key role in national disability policies, others include well-acknowledged user organisations, major health services providers, and academic institutions.

The wealth of knowledge and expertise mobilised by the EASTIN network can provide precious contributions to global discussion on policy issues related to assistive technology. A significant example was the International Seminar on Assistive Technology Service Delivery Systems, organised in 2012 in conjunction with the AAATE (Association for the Advancement of Assistive technology in Europe), leading to a Position Paper that offers suggestion for improving national policies related to public assistive technology provision.

Now EASTIN continues to play a role in the global scene by taking part in the newly established **IAATO (International Alliance of Assistive Technology Organizations)**, which includes AAATE, RESNA, RESJA, ARATA, RESKO, ATIA, TREATS, BATA and AATA) and bringing active contributions to the recently established Global Collaboration on Assistive Technology (GATE) at the World Health Organization.

Today, the EASTIN website has achieved its maturity:

- it fully works in 25 languages;
- it provides detailed information on over 70.000 products available in the European market;
- it provides a wealth of associated information;
- searches can be performed across all national information systems despite their different technical platforms;
- natural-language queries can be carried out in several languages, thanks to the linguistic knowledge base inherited from the EASTIN-CL project;
- products can be searched in a very detailed way – especially ICT-based products – thanks to the taxonomies and the search tools inherited by the ETNA project;
- the system is robust and flexible in such a way that any temporary failure or technical changes in national systems don't hamper the performance of the EASTIN engine;
- all national system belonging to the network fully meet the national information needs.

Action

In the pursue of the above vision, in the triennium 2020-2022 the EASTIN Association will mainly concentrate on the following activities (preliminary list, to be enriched through discussion among the EASTIN members):

2020: Strengthening the current network

- Priorities related to the EASTIN network:
 - **Strengthen** the governance (make the Board working collegially and meet regularly by web conferencing).
 - **Revitalize** the network (achieve a clear view of which of the current members will be Affiliate or National Contacts; keep network e-meetings on a regular basis).
 - **Re-establish** connection with countries that participated in the network in the past (Finland, Hungary).
 - **Increase** the number of affiliates and national contacts, especially in Europe and Asia.
 - **Participate** in wider networks (attend the annual GAATO meeting; participate in ICCHP 2020; provide experts for the WHO GATE project on the “decision tree”).
- Priorities related to the EASTIN website / search engine:
 - **Clean** the system (fix remaining bugs; hiding functionalities that don't fully work, such as e.g. the “product review”, which has been disabled by the closure of the ATIS4all project; hide searches producing zero results because of no data in the source databases; adjust inconsistencies that are still present in some language layers; close non-maintained language layers).
 - **Comply** with state-of-the-art privacy regulations (GDPR) and accessibility standards (WCAG 2.0 / WAI level AA; level AAA would be unrealistic as it depends on the contents fed by the source databases)-
 - **Improve** the system (better management of right-to-left languages; solutions for non-online-editable labels).

- **Include** other three databases (pilot the connection of the Israeli “Azarim” database; pilot the connection of the Spanish “SIPA” database, which is replacing the former “Catalogo”; put into operation the already-piloted connection of the Taiwan TREATS database, which was empty until recently).
- **Organize** a technical meeting among the partners who operate the source databases, to share experiences (e.g. the Rehadat expertise on search tools and machine translation) and discuss developments (introducing functions such as “remembers last search”, improving interface friendliness, upgrading free-text searches by means of synonyms and spelling corrections etc.).
- **Introduce** a new section to inform/advertise about international events within the GAATO collaboration.
- Priorities related to each network member
 - **Promote** EASTIN in at least **one national event**.
 - **Ensuring** that the link to the EASTIN system is present and well visible in each member’s website.

2021: Expanding the network

- Priorities related to the EASTIN network:
 - **Increase** the number of partners (the organizations who successfully plugged-in their databases in 2021).
 - **Increase** the number of affiliates and national contacts, especially in the Americas and Africa.
 - **Refine** the organizational and sustainability model to adapt to the growing size of the network.
 - **Participate** in wider networks (attend the annual GAATO meeting; keep a workshop at AAATE 2021; keep a workshop in the annual conference of some other IAATO members; provide expert support to the WHO GATE project on the “decision tree; provide data for the *WHO Global Report on Improving Access to Assistive Technology*)
- Priorities related to the EASTIN website / search engine:
 - **Implement** the new release of the ISO 9999 standard, whose publication is expected at end 2020 or 2021, and keep connection with the ISO Classification Subcommittee.
 - **Establish** a working group to ensure that all partners use ISO codes in the same way.
 - **Create** a video presentation of the EASTIN system and of how it works and **connect** to social networks.
 - **Find a way** to implement WHO-related searches (consistent use of ICF codes in the Organizations and Associated Info searches; methods to link ISO searches to APL searches).
 - **Improve** the overall quality contents (agree on measurable information quality standards; better exploit the “organization” and “associate information” sections).
 - **Include** additional AT databases (piloting the connections)
- Priorities related to each network member
 - **Promote** EASTIN in at least **one national event**, possibly involving also other members of the network.

2022: Achieving global coverage

- Priorities related to the EASTIN network:
 - **Increase** the number of partners (the organizations who successfully plugged-in their databases in 2021).
 - **Increase** the number of affiliates and national contacts, in order to cover the remaining countries.
 - **Participate** in wider networks (attend the annual GAATO meeting, keep workshop in the GAATO members’ Conferences).
- Priorities related to the EASTIN website / search engine:
 - **Consider** inclusion of not only products but also services.
 - **Consider** a major upgrade of the EASTIN system to align it to state-of-the-art technology and ensure that its contents is at the highest quality level.
- Priorities related to each network member
 - **Promote** EASTIN in at least one national event, possibly involving other members of the network.