

Opening Speech for Commissioner Hübner

UPEC Conference "The Outermost Regions, a chance for Europe",

Brussels, 3 December 2008 (14.30 – 15.00)

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Dear Minister Jégo, Dear President Rivero Baute, Dear Representatives of Member States, Honourable Members of the European Parliament, Secretary General of the UPEC, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure for me to be here with you today, in the Committee of the Regions' building, and to open this Conference. I would like to congratulate the Union Economique des Régions ultrapériphériques de l'Europe communautaire (UPEC) for the initiative to organize such a conference and the French Presidency for its support to this event. We need this kind of initiative as it strengthens the already excellent partnership we have developed throughout the years between the EU Institutions, the outermost regions and the Member States. The title of this Conference shows clearly the importance that we all here today confer on the outermost regions.

Indeed, this conference builds on a communication adopted by the Commission last October called "The outermost regions: an asset for Europe". This has become part of our new language but not only. Indeed, the main objective of this Communication is to introduce not only a new approach or a new paradigm in the way the European Union views and deals with the Outermost Regions but also in the way the OR should view themselves. It is clear to us that the OR should no longer be considered as "problem regions" but rather as "regions of opportunities". This means, in concrete terms, that they add value and contribute to the development of the EU in different areas ranging from their geo-strategic position, maritime potentials, agriculture to spatial activities. I have had the privilege to visit all of the OR and I could see with my own eyes their diversity and their common problems as well as their dynamic approach in many of these fields.

I also met all Presidents of the outermost regions at their annual Conference at the end of October in Cayenne and this new approach was clearly supported, indeed applauded and also reflected in the final Declaration of the conference. This political and partnership backing from the regions gives us a solid ground on which to base our common future work. We cannot, of course, do this without the Member States hence the importance of a presidency sponsored event such as this but also the joint efforts by the three Member States concerned in putting into practice the new approach.

We all know that the outermost regions face particular permanent handicaps. We are all aware that the Treaty allows, where necessary, for special measures when implementing EU policies. It is on this legal basis that the cohesion policy and other European investment policies, for many years now, have worked towards strengthening their competitiveness but also their regional integration. We also pay specific attention to "mainstreaming" the concerns and priorities of the outermost regions across all our community policies.

Indeed, in the current financial period (2007 – 2013) the EU will invest a total of 7.8 billion Euros in those 7 regions. This figure includes structural, agricultural and fishery funds. While ensuring continued attention to the permanent handicaps and difficulties we also need to bring about this qualitative change that I mentioned, to shift the method and build on the opportunities, upgrading the assets as indeed these regions have a lot to offer to the Union. In short, a move from removing obstacles to developing potentials.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Four topics are foreseen today for discussion: the geostrategic issue, the maritime dimension, the forest, coastal and oceanic heritage and the role for spatial and satellite activities. Those are only a few examples of fields where outermost regions have great potential but there is a need to further identify the potential for specialisation and strong comparative advantages of OR are the highest.

This requires actions, no doubt about that, and the Commission is committed to assisting the OR in finding the ways to put into practice the new approach, for instance by helping to ensure full use of existing EU support. But there is also a need to promote further uptake of other opportunities offered by EU programmes such as the 7th framework programme for Research and Development, the Culture programme for cooperation projects or lifelong learning programmes. There are certainly many other EU programmes of interest where opportunities exist but they are, at the moment, underexploited by the outermost regions. In short, there is not enough of OR's in these programmes.

To assist the OR in this task, we have created ad-hoc task forces or inter-DG working groups to look at these issues and how the OR can further tap into these programmes. The first working group will deal with how the 7th framework programme on research and development functions. This first group will specifically target Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guyana and start its work in March-April.

Other actions are also important to reinforce this new approach, these are reflected in our communication, but I would like to particularly mention the issue of regional integration or insertion and cooperation with neighbouring countries. This is a key issue for the OR but also for the EU as a whole and I sincerely believe that the OR should be seen as bridgeheads for promoting common EU interests in these areas.

In all, the Communication, the political declaration by the presidents in Guyana and the actions I mentioned represent a good starting point for our new approach and I sincerely hope that we can take this further, developing our experiences into a reinforced strategy for the OR in view of meeting future challenges in the new cohesion policy framework from 2014.

On the subject of future challenges, allow me to mention our recently published report called "Regions 2020" looking specifically at how challenges such as climate change, demography, energy and economic globalisation will impact on the European regions. The OR are at the forefront of these challenges and given their particular situation we will undertake more targeted studies to enable us to better understand their impacts on the outermost regions.

Let me end on an issue that touches all of us, the global financial crisis and the economic slowdown. As you know, the Commission adopted last week a recovery package where cohesion policy has a major role to play in terms of investment in the "real economy". We will work on several concrete actions to simplify procedures, to facilitate the use of financial engineering, extending eligibility periods and to inject more liquidity into the first years of programming in terms of supplementary advances. I hope this package will stimulate demand, help SME and, more generally speaking, lessen the impact of the downturn.

We are targeting a final decision for next February, during the Czech presidency. The proposals are to large extent relevant for the OR, indeed they will receive around 120M€ in supplementary advances but they can also profit from, if they request this, prolonged eligibility for the 2000-2006 period or the facilitation for payments to major projects.

Thank you for inviting me to the opening session of this Conference. I wish you all a constructive and fruitful exchange of ideas. Due to my agenda and a trip to Italy this afternoon, I must unfortunately leave directly after the introductions but I assure you that my services will inform me of the work that has been done here today.

Thank you for your attention.