

Speech by Ms Danuta Hübner, EU Commissioner for Regional policy

**Launch of the cross-border cooperation programme  
"Grensregio Vlaanderen-Nederland"**

*Antwerp, 17 March 2008*

Dear Ministers,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be with you today for the official launch of your new cross-border cooperation programme for the period 2007-2013.

It's a great pleasure to be here, in a region of Europe where cooperation has a long history. For the last 50 years, Europe has been benefiting from working together to overcome border effects. Indeed, as founding members of the BENELUX in 1948, your two countries showed the way to the rest of Europe – you were part of the inspiration to create a single market in Europe and to erase our internal borders!

In the past, especially in the 1990s, the main frame of reference for the development of our regions was of an internal nature, tending to leave external challenges to national governments and other Community policies, such as trade policy. Today, we look at the cross-boarder cooperation from a different perspective than a decade ago. European regions cannot anymore position themselves and

measure their competitiveness only against the European economy. It is increasingly the case that the most successful regions are those which have managed to internationalize their economies. Any comprehensive investment strategy lacking global perspective is doomed to bring (in the longer term) marginalization and loss of competitiveness. In this global context, the contribution of regions to European integration reveals the role of cross-border cooperation particularly important.

This alters the very meaning of catching up. Cohesion policy is no longer a tool to help regions catch up with the Union's average and reaffirm themselves within their own territory. The aim must be to assist regions in finding their place in global markets, acting as a development policy whose main objective is to foster endogenous growth and ensure equality of opportunity throughout the Union's territories. Regional policy is acting as a policy which addresses opportunities for the future, by mobilising underexploited potential, rather than compensates for the problems of the past.

Therefore, cross-border work is becoming more and more important in our policy. Territorial co-operation programmes have been upgraded, and since 2007 have the status of being a full Objective of EU Regional Policy. This shows the political importance the European Parliament, the Member States and the European

Commission now attach to cross-border, trans-national and interregional co-operation. Funding has been boosted too, by 50 per cent and we now have a budget of 8.3 billion EUR for the three types of cooperation across these borders out of which 5.5 billion will go exclusively to cross-border cooperation programmes along the 60 internal borders we have in Europe, many more borders after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements.

So far, we have made good progress in launching the 2007-2013 period. Of the 80 territorial cooperation programmes we have, 60 have already been adopted and have started being implemented and another 15 will be signed by me before the end of March. So we have good programmes. We have also the EGTC – on the 19th June 2008 Interinstitutional Conference.

At this stage let me highlight how your border region will benefit from strong support through the ERDF in the 2007-2013 period. There are many programmes here.

- We launch today, under the cross-border component of the 'European Territorial Cooperation' objective, your new programme which amounts to 190 million euros (out of which 95 million euros from the ERDF). This is an increase of 16% compared to the previous period.

- Some of you will also qualify for cross-border cooperation in the framework of other programmes such as the "Rhein-Maas" with Germany or the "Lower North Sea" with the UK. There will be complementarities between all these programmes and I am sure that you will make good use of them.
- Under the transnational component of the 'European Territorial Cooperation' objective, you will have the possibility to participate in projects under the "North-West Europe" and "North Sea" transnational programmes. Together, these two programmes have a budget of 970 million euros. Such transnational programmes covering large areas which have particular features are designed to address the challenges and opportunities on a wider scale with a strong strategic dimension.
- I would also want to encourage you to participate in the networks financed under the INTERREG IVC programme, which has a total budget of 321 million euros. These networks provide an ideal opportunity to share expertise and experiences and to find cooperation partners. As you know, the Commission has launched an initiative in 2007 for the establishment of high value-added networks where we hope to see a fast and meaningful transfer of experiences and best practices between regions – it is called "Regions for Economic Change". As a region with a long-standing

history in cross-border cooperation and economic development, we hope that you will take an active part in these networking activities.

- But do not forget that your regions will have regional operational programmes under the "competitiveness and employment" objective of the European Regional Development Fund. I know that in Flanders you are keen to use these funds also to develop inter-regional cooperation projects, in particular in the field of innovation and with the new Member States. It's good news. The challenge is to exploit fully the potential of all the programmes. It's true that it is essential to have a good programme but it is just the first step you have experienced to build upon.

So, you see, there are a lot of opportunities ahead!

But there are also clear challenges :

- Firstly, your programme management

After a fruitful dialogue with the Commission, you have proposed a new structure for the management of the programme. You will set up a brand new single Joint Secretariat in Antwerp – this new office will be dedicated entirely to the new programme, with a team of Flemish and Dutch staff. The new Director has already been appointed and we wish him all the best in setting up and guiding his team.

The Managing Authority for the programme, the Province of Antwerp, has also reviewed the way in which it fulfils this function and wants to establish stronger links between the Managing Authority and the Secretariat, which is also a good news.

Even more importantly, you have decided to set up a single Steering Committee to replace the two which existed previously. This is for us a positive signal that the partners are serious about implementing a single programme and about developing genuine border-wide projects.

- Secondly, few words on the projects

Europe faces new and complex challenges.

We want to have the most competitive European economy in the world, we want our youngsters to have jobs, or, even better, high quality jobs and we want to get on top of climate change, energy efficiency and renewables. We must get better at fulfilling these ambitious goals. This is why we must adapt the way we govern ourselves and the way in which we use public finances so that we can meet these global challenges together. And cross-border cooperation can make a significant contribution to this.

Turning now to the details of your cross-border programme.

Your vision is articulated around the triangle **ECONOMY – ENVIRONMENT – PEOPLE**. You intend to realise the region's potential through a competitive economy while at the same time protecting the environment and providing your citizens with excellent living conditions. This is the right choice and in tune with the EU's objectives pursued through the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs.

To realise your vision, you will need to develop strong partnerships which encompass all sectors of society and which genuinely work together to implement this shared vision.

What you are facing now is a genuine opportunity to move into a new era of cooperation. There's a good chance that your projects will not only bring temporary benefits to the region but change the way in which, in the long-term, you manage your resources together and create long-lasting conditions for competitiveness and sustainable growth.

My services will be keen to work alongside the programme partners to achieve this. We will be there to support you – with our European Territorial Cooperation specialists but also with our thematic specialists when necessary. You have committed yourselves to developing what you call "Lighthouse Projects" – we look forward to

discussing those with you and to seeing them come to life. A lighthouse fulfils an extremely important role – it shows us the way. But it can only do if it shines brightly. That is your challenge for the coming months and years. Just shine!

This afternoon, you will present one of your existing projects: I can see that you do not start from scratch and you already have good examples of how cross-border cooperation should operate and how it can contribute to competitiveness and growth: that businesses from both sides of the border can actually all use the same sophisticated equipment to train their staff or test materials is a great achievement called "Procesindustrie 2010". That private actors can actually see that, while they compete, at the same time cooperating through, the pooling of resources can bring the benefits to all is very good news indeed. We need a multiplication of this type of cooperation projects which would be beneficial to your region as well as all over Europe.

I could not help noticing on the way from Brussels to Antwerp that road traffic in this area is very dense – you seem to experience serious bottlenecks. We hope that here too, cross-border cooperation can help find joint solutions. Transport surely is crucial to your future competitiveness and well-being. How would you keep up your love for cycling if all your roads became so over-used?

I understand that 2000-2006 funds have been already used already to look at local bus routes and how they can be optimised to carry commuters across the border. The national authorities have used INTERREG to greatly improve the navigation conditions on the river Scheldt, thereby reducing navigation times and increase traffic safety on the river. You are also in the process of renovating an old disused railway link which will in the future be used to transport goods and relieve truck traffic. These are the types of concrete projects we also want to see in the 2007-2013 period.

And what about health care? Cooperation is also needed to boost the returns on public spending: why would two hospitals located within a 50km radius invest in very expensive equipment of the same type? Wouldn't it be better for the citizens if they specialised complementary disciplines and shared their facilities?

Together, we should aim high and ensure that the local, regional, national and European levels all contribute their share for a better Europe. The Dutch-Flemish border region has already contributed greatly to European integration - you have all along been true pioneers. It should remain that way and that is why we want to see your programme 2007-2013 in the top league of cross-border cooperation programmes!

Show the way and demonstrate how beneficial it is for all to cooperate and turn borders into crossing opportunities rather than obstacles. Doing this is making a genuine contribution to European Cohesion and European integration overall.

For the next two years, we will carry on discussing on the future shape of regional policy. We're satisfied with the results of the public consultations that I presented two weeks ago:

- regional policy covers all regions and responds to economic challenges: competition, demography (ageing), climate change;
- the need to a stronger involvement of local/regional authorities and simplification of the procedures.

The new treaty adds the notion of territorial cohesion to economic and social cohesion. It also provides a new definition of subsidiarity, emphasizing the role of regional and local actors.

In September, the Commission will publish the Green Paper on territorial cohesion. A public consultation on this will be launched. We'll be happy to have your opinion.

The Commission is fully committed to supporting these developments. Funding is available for the next seven years but also political and technical support is at hand. You can count on us to help you. So much depends on your success: if shared with others! I was pleased during the Open days that Dutch and Flemish representatives contributed so that we could work together and make Europe move forward.

I wish you good luck in your co-operation projects!