

Speech by Commissioner Hübner

**Launch of RegioStars – 2008 Regional Innovation Awards -
and the new Inforegio Website**

Committee of the Regions, March, 8, 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen

I spoke yesterday about regional policy and the role of regions in fostering economic modernisation and innovation in Europe. So it is opportune that I start by thanking President Delebarre for his presentation on the Committee of Regions' Lisbon Monitoring Platform. It is an important initiative which demonstrates and promotes the regions' involvement in policy design and implementation. It also makes more visible the central role that regional policy plays in the delivery of the Lisbon agenda.

Today, I would like to talk to you about some novelties prepared by the Commission with the aim of further stimulation of investment in innovation. As you know, Commission's initiative, Regions for Economic Change, aims to support regions and cities to innovate through a range of new schemes. I am launching two of them today: a new part of the INFOREGIO website on good practices and RegioStars, the awards for innovative projects.

Let me start with the ideas behind the new approach to INFOREGIO website. The new programming period of regional policy is almost in place: financial perspectives have been agreed, the new regulations and the Community Strategic Guidelines have been adopted. All 27 NSRFs have been submitted to the Commission, along with 127 Operational Programmes (out of 438) and we expect to receive the remaining documents in the coming days. Now it is a time to discuss with regions how well their development strategies are designed. Once the negotiations are over the real challenge to regions will be to implement their strategies and to mobilise all their potential towards the same aim, whether under the Convergence or the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objectives: generating economic growth and jobs and improving the competitiveness of their territories.

Although the "when", the "who" and the "why" are clear, still a lot remains to be done about "how" - how regions can implement an efficient innovation policy. We can refer this question to the themes of our conference - what can a region do to improve the competitiveness of small businesses, to help research finding its way to the market, to modernize health services or to reduce the urban congestion and pollution? I think that all public decision makers would agree with me that financial resources are only a precondition. We need ideas and the know-how to implement them.

There is no standard solution for all regions, of course, but there are many practical examples to learn from. The Commission wants to actively support the dissemination and the exchange of these so-called

"good practices". Maybe you have already discovered a new publication available on the conference stands. It contains the summaries of 40 innovation projects developed by regional authorities in different domains such as enterprise clustering, science and industry networking, ICT services for citizens and many others.

The new part of INFOREGIO website contains full version of these case studies as PDF files – implemented within the Regional Programmes of Innovative Actions 2000 – 2006. They include the strategic context, the innovative dimension, the partnership and the obstacles encountered in design or implementation. Each study concludes with the lessons learnt and the good practices identified. I think it is particularly useful that the difficulties encountered and overcome are also described, as we often learn more from them than from successes. If you want to know more about these people and their experiences, we have included their contact details.

I always supported knowledge sharing but I also know that learning from the others is an art in itself. I know that a frequent objection to this type of initiative is that regions are very different one from another and that "what works there does not work here". Another issue is that time brings changes and we must be wise when learning from the past, as challenges and competitive advantages evolve in time. We have to incorporate this approach into our idea on how to use best practices as and our database will be constantly fed by a stream of new ideas designed for new situations.

The diversity of regional contexts in which you all work matters. My services have integrated in the case studies the background context; you can see how the projects are rooted in their territory, tailored to the regional needs and resources and that they include the strategic dimension. Discovering these projects should catalyse reflection. You may decide that the approach tested by a region does not fit with the institutional reality or the culture of yours; nevertheless, you may be able to pick up and adapt some interesting ideas. Innovation requires open minds and an ability to move on from established wisdom.

Still, even if those studies cover a wide range of EU regions and projects there are some common findings. Our experience is that despite the differences resulting from the sector or territory, regional authorities identify similar challenges and, at the same time, the critical success factors for innovation projects are similar across different contexts.

For example, partnerships and networks take time to build. It is so, because without trust and effective communication between partners, innovation will not be successful. Therefore, building a strategy through partnerships involving industry, universities and public authorities is a long process and requires a lot of enthusiasm and energy. Experience shows us that networks seem to take at least two years to build and become effective.

Another useful finding is that effective partnerships and networks require active and consistent management and design: the necessary support

has to be provided during the whole project life and often far beyond. Cooperation between different institutions and partners will not happen by itself. Well designed partnerships require also negotiating the clear division of roles and responsibilities of each of partners. We need to take it into account when planning for innovative measures and actions.

Research shows us that the regional level tends to be the most effective for the support of innovation; however, this presumes that the region possesses the institutional framework on which to build, including public authorities, research and education institutions. National and regional authorities need to work together to ensure coherent and mutually supportive structures and policies – to create an environment in which innovation can flourish.

The examples presented on the website were developed by my services in partnership with project promoters and regional authorities. Later in the year, more examples will be included from mainstream programmes in the EU27. Our website will make public those cases of good studies which we were able to identify so far. But I am convinced that there is a lot more to discover. Therefore I asked my services to organise a competition to highlight the best innovative projects in the regions. Hence RegioStars, awards designed to celebrate Innovation Projects.

I know that regions and cities have good innovative practices in development which they have designed and tested. I have had the opportunity to visit many such projects over the past three years. The

identification and communication of these good practices is the main objective of these Awards because they can be attractive and inspiring to other regional, urban and local actors. So, it is an opportunity for regions and cities and any other local authorities which are successfully investing ERDF resources to find and showcase their hidden stars!

RegioStars will focus on different themes each year to showcase as many innovative projects as possible. For the 2008 Awards, we are giving prominence to two themes: "regional economies based on knowledge and technological innovation" and "sustainable economic development". Each theme has two categories. We therefore invite one application from every region under one of the following categories:

- Supporting clusters and business networks,
- Technology transfer from research institutes to SMEs,
- Energy efficiency and renewable energies, and
- Environmental technologies.

To be as inclusive of all EU regions as possible, RegioStars will be open to projects that have received ERDF or pre-accession funding. There will be recognition for projects from both Regional Competitiveness and Employment Objective regions and Convergence Objective regions.

The deadline for submission is 29 June this year. By that date I hope to receive 268 excellent project applications. After this date my services,

with the assistance of experts from other DGs, will analyse the applications and we will shortlist 40 for the consideration of the RegioStars jury. The authors of short listed projects will also have the opportunity to work with us in producing good practice case studies to be published at the RegioStars 2008 event. These case studies of the "best" projects from RegioStars will expand our database of good practice and feed the process of exchange of experience across regions.

I am currently establishing the RegioStars jury which will comprise experts in the fields of the award categories. As well as a trophy, the award will be the honour, prestige and visibility the winning project and region or city will receive. The choice of project, and the process and method for choosing it, are entirely up to the regional managing authorities. I am sure I can rely on the regional authorities to come up with some creative ideas of how to select the project which will represent your region.

To conclude, I wish you all the best in your selection of projects and look forward to meeting again at the next year's conference when we will congratulate the winners and applaud the best examples of regional innovative practice.

Thank you for your attention,