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European Commissioner responsible for Regional Policy

"More innovation through regional cooperation"

~~Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort~~

EU interregional cooperation forum 2007 celebrating
interreg iiic – launching interreg ivc

Lisbon, 20 September 2007

Dear Minister,

Thank you very much for welcoming us to Lisbon to this conference on interregional cooperation. I have been told that your conference has attracted so much interest that the organisers even had to operate a waiting list! Mobilising so many participants from the local, regional and national levels in all Member States is indeed a big success for the Portuguese Presidency and I would like to congratulate you for this success.

I would also like to use this opportunity to share some good news with you concerning the adoption of cooperation programmes for the period 2007-2013. To date, the Commission has already adopted eight programmes, including the transnational programmes for Madeira-Açores-Canarias and for the Atlantic Area where Portugal hosts the Managing Authority. Many other programmes are well advanced, including your cross-border co-operation programme with Spain, which I hope will still be approved this month.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe is currently at the crossroads of numerous factors of change, such as increasing economic pressure from global competitors, the ageing of our societies, rising energy prices, or climate change. These challenges do not stop at national or institutional borders and they impact directly on regional and local communities. In the years to come they will redefine the map of Europe and overshadow traditional descriptions we are using today – such as those referring to new and old Member States.

In this global context, catching up takes different forms. The role of regional policy is to accelerate the mobilisation of regional development potential with a view to help regional economies find their place in world markets, in critical global networks and clusters; to allow them to measure their strengths and weaknesses against European and global challenges and opportunities and to foster their internationalisation.

Through regional policy we made the case that the regional and local levels are amongst the most valuable assets for Europe. It is at regional level where knowledge is circulated and transferred, innovation systems are built and where competition to attract investment takes place. Today, in a global world, it is clearer than ever that the competitiveness of Europe cannot be achieved by the Union or by individual Member States acting on their own. They need the regions to succeed and economic success requires a close cooperation between all of them.

The need for co-operation is obvious: Many regions are facing specific challenges generated by the effects of globalisation on their economy, by changing demographic patterns which have impact on the provision of regional services and labour markets, with a view to improving and by climate change. Across Europe, a wealth of experience and best practice has been accumulated on how to cope successfully with these challenges. In many regions we can find already today the capacity to improve regional attractiveness, to cope with the effects of climate change, or to identify alternative energy sources and to improve energy efficiency.

It is a matter of common sense that much is to be gained from an exchange of experience on these issues since good solutions developed in one place could also be helpful somewhere else. The success of the INTERREG III C Community initiative is an impressive proof of this need for cooperation.

We want to be even more ambitious in the period 2007-2013. What used to be a Community initiative it is now a fully fledged Objective of the EU Regional Policy. This is an important political signal, placing Cooperation on the same level as the Convergence and Competitiveness objectives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

we have gathered here in Lisbon to launch the new interregional cooperation programme for 2007-2013, which will also provide the legal and financial basis of our new initiative Regions for Economic Change.

I expect this programme to promote the exchange of experiences in innovation and economic modernisation to foster the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European Union as a whole.

I also expect that the new programme will provide regions with a range of useful and user-friendly support and services:

First, it should help a region facing particular challenges to find out which other regions have had to tackle similar problems. The region would thus gain ideas about how other regions have addressed similar challenges, about any good practice that may already have been identified.

Second, it should promote cooperation between regions so that they can get together, compare approaches, identify what has worked, what was a failure, jointly develop ways to address problems and communicate the results in order to make them available to others.

Finally, once a region has identified through interregional co-operation a way to address its problem, it should be supported in moving to the implementation stage, during which the good practice identified is put into practice at regional level.

It is this three-step process - getting access to information, cooperating with others in order to develop new approaches and finally the transfer of the good practice to the implementation stage - that both the new interregional cooperation programme and the Regions for Economic Change initiative are designed to support.

How does this support work in practice for each of these three stages?

For the first stage, Regions for Economic Change helps through the organisation of thematic conferences which offer regions a forum to meet and discuss issues of joint concerns. Two very successful thematic conferences have already been held in the first half of this year, one on the demographic challenges and one on innovation, and more of these are to come. In addition, the programme's website will be an important source of information.

For the second stage, the setting up of co-operation projects around shared theme, the new interregional cooperation programme will provide support for the concrete exchange of experiences and the joint development of new approaches. In fact, this conference provides you with the opportunity to find potential project partners and discuss ways to work together.

Finally, coming to the transfer element at the third stage: As you may know, the capitalisation projects are a new feature of interregional cooperation, and of particular importance to Regions for Economic Change. They are designed to support regions in transferring good practice to the implementation stage, putting good ideas into practice through the Convergence and Competitiveness programmes.

In some of these projects, which will be called "Fast Track networks", the Commission will be actively involved and provide expertise. These will also be supported by specific information and publicity actions aiming at disseminating the results to a wider circle of regions.

One aspect I would especially like to see stressed in capitalisation projects and especially in the Fast Track ones, is the involvement of the decision makers in regional policy and the Managing Authorities of the cohesion programmes of the participating regions.

This is because the core aim of the networking part of the Regions for Economic Change initiative is transferring the good practice identified in co-operation projects to the regional policy makers "at home", so that the good ideas found through co-operation can be implemented in the framework of the Convergence and Competitiveness programmes.

How can we ensure the follow-up of good ideas that were identified through interregional co-operation so that these ideas are really put into practice?

Let me just point out that the Commission has undertaken significant efforts in raising the awareness about the Regions for Economic Change initiative of those dealing with the Convergence and Competitiveness programmes in the regions. This meant in concrete terms that we proposed to include a specific opening clause in these operational programmes which would allow for the funding of implementation activities flowing from good ideas identified in interregional co-operation. The vast majority of programmes now include this opening clause – and it is of course our hope that it will be made wide use of!

One concrete example, in which this link with the Managing Authorities responsible and the moving to the concrete implementation, is currently being tested, is the INTERREG III C CLOE project (Clusters Linked Over Europe: A European Network of Excellence for Cluster Management, Matching and Promotion). This project is currently running a pilot phase to test this new approach.

CLOE has under the INTERREG III C programme already developed a guide on cluster management, since that was their topic for co-operation. On the basis of this work undertaken previously, the project has now enlarged its partnership and established a firm link to most of the partners' Managing Authorities. Partners have carried out a considerable amount of work so far: Each partner region has carried out a SWOT analysis in order to determine where it stands on cluster policies and what its needs are. The aim is to prepare, by the end of the pilot phase in February 2008, action plans for concrete implementation of cluster policies under the regional cohesion programmes. The progress so far is in my view very promising.

To conclude, let me encourage you as regional representatives to be open to new ideas - don't think you have to solve your problems on your own! Get together with regions facing similar problems, benefit from experiences made elsewhere, work together with other regions to develop solutions and address the challenges you are facing! Involve the right people in your projects to ensure the follow-up of the good practice!

I wish you the best of success for your cooperation activities, a fruitful conference and thank you for your attention.