

Closing Remarks of Commissioner Danuta Hübner
Regional responses to demographic challenges
Brussels 26 January 2006

President Dimitriadis, Mr van Nistelrooij, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My ambitions for this conference were three fold.

First, I hoped that it would promote a greater understanding of the impact of demographic change on Europe's regions. From EUROSTAT and from other expert speakers we have heard the latest statistics and information on demographic change and the likely tendencies. Europe and each of its regions are clearly facing an unprecedented ageing of the population. We had clear evidence that population structure and trends vary significantly among regions, and that the timing of this ageing phenomenon varies. I was particularly struck by the fact that the projections indicate that nearly half of the EU regions will have a smaller population in 2031 than in 2004. The geographical pattern in these trends is also striking. In the regions of the North East, the population is decreasing, while in the northern, western and most southern regions of the Union, the population will continue to grow as immigration compensates for the natural decline. This has been a good meeting from the point of view of deepening our understanding of the challenges, and also of identifying areas where we need to know more.

The second ambition was to give a platform to those project promoters and regions that are already responding successfully to the challenges of ageing and the changing population structure. I said yesterday that we have a duty to share our experiences at regional level more widely, and I think you have done that in this conference. Thank you for that. Most

importantly we have seen how in some cases the potential negative effects of demographic change can be mitigated and even reversed if we come with a policy response early enough. This challenge can often be turned into an opportunity – 'the silver economy network' showed us the potential for creating new markets, new products and new services. These are not just in areas we expect such as health and care services, but also in areas such as tourism and the restaurant trade. We need to encourage our enterprises to exploit these new opportunities, and I think the conference has shown that microfinance can play an important part in that. We will be working on this issue in the months to come. We have also seen strategies which ensure that all policies are "age-proofed" such as in Brandenburg, or the "City of children" initiative in Stuttgart to make the city an attractive place to live for children, young people and parents.

My third ambition was related to the need to have tools to help us to integrate the demographic dimension more systematically and strategically into our programmes. One such tool is the 'Age Proofing Toolkit', developed by partners in the UK, and adapted for wide use under the sponsorship of the Committee of the Regions. It will help to ensure that all those responsible for policies at regional and local level incorporate the issue of ageing population fully into their work. A second tool is of course the networks which can be created under the Regions for Economic Change Initiative. In the next months we will launch four pilot networks (bringing innovative ideas faster to the market; improving the capacity of regions for research and innovation; a low carbon economy; and improving air quality). Given the richness of our exchanges here in the last two days, I hope that demography will feature strongly in the next batch of networks that we launch later this year.

The creation of such a network would not mean that the demographic challenge is a separate priority which is covered only in specific parts of our programmes. The demographic challenge must be mainstreamed, and I know that my colleague Vladimir Spidla who leads on demography in the Commission supports this line. Sustainable regional development must be based on policies that take it fully into account. Our infrastructure policies must be adapted to the changing patterns of demand that will result from evolving age profiles; we must help all our citizens to equip themselves for full participation in the labour force and for longer productive lives; we must ensure that our policies on innovation and entrepreneurship are tailored to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and older population.

European cohesion policy aims to promote the sustainable development of all European regions and in particular to seek to reduce the disparities of those regions lagging behind. This is why one of the key Community Strategic Guidelines is to make Europe and its regions – all its regions – more attractive places to live, to work and to invest. 'Regions for all ages' is how one of you expressed it, and I think that is very appropriate. As Vladimir Špidla emphasised this morning, we need to use this demographic change as an opportunity to create more cohesive societies. There is "no one size fits all" strategy to achieve this. But responding to the demographic challenges ahead will require a coherent, long term effort involving the commitment of a wide partnership of policy makers and those who deliver policy on the ground.

Let me conclude by informing you that the proceedings of the conference will be published as soon as possible in the next months. This will enable us all to extract maximum benefit from the exchanges during these two days. And finally I would encourage you to come back to Brussels on 6th

and 7th of March for the Regions for Economic Change Conference on Fostering Competitiveness through innovative technologies, products and healthy communities. This will be another important occasion to pursue our discussions on how to promote growth, jobs and competitiveness in Europe's Regions.

Finally, I would like to thank my services in DG Regional Policy for organising this conference so successfully - in particular Eddy Hartog and John Walsh - and the many other Directorates General which have supported us: Employment, Agriculture, Enterprise, Health and Consumer Protection, Information Society and Media, and Eurostat. This in itself shows that demography is an issue which has an impact on a wide range of important policy areas.

Thank you for your attention and for your active participation in the conference.