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"Regions and cities in the challenging world"

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

OPEN DAYS 2008 – Closing session (European Parliament)

Brussels, 9 October 2008

President Pöttering, President Van den Brande, honourable members of the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions, Dear Friends,

For four days your energy and enthusiasm made Brussels the voice of regional and local Europe. Now OPEN DAYS 2008 are coming to an end.

In the past years I used to start my closing speeches by saying that never before have so many regions, cities and participants shared the OPEN DAYS experience. I won't disappoint you by making an exception this year; we had 7,500 registered participants in more than 140 seminars and workshops focused on regional development and cooperation, here in Brussels and continuing all over Europe. All of this reported by regional media represented by almost two hundred journalists. So, who said that our citizens are tired of Europe?

This year OPEN DAYS focused on the challenges and opportunities that affect regions throughout Europe and beyond. Let me briefly go through most important messages I took from these discussions.

First, the new regional policy got it right. The four major themes we have discussed over the past four days – innovation, sustainable development, co-operation and the future cohesion policy – are underpinned by the fact that European regions and cities are active actors in the global economy. This engagement was the foundation of the silent revolution which put Lisbon, innovation, climate change, new mechanisms for co-operation such as the European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation and Regions for Economic Change, as well as novel forms of financial engineering at the heart of regional policy for 2007-2013.

Indeed, the OPEN DAYS have once again demonstrated the creativity and wealth of ideas that regions and cities are generating to help Europe face global challenges. And the role that European regional policy can play in equipping them with necessary instruments and means. This is multi-level governance at its best – Community, Member States, regions and cities working hand in hand. This is how we can meet the expectations of our citizens. 84% of them, according to a recent Eurobarometer survey, want EU regional policy to play a frontline role in tackling the challenges of globalisation, climate and demographic change.

The second message is that there is no long term development strategy for a city or a region which does not build on internationalization. We all have to "learn to fly", no matter where our region or city is located. Regional and local authorities need to anticipate and react to international developments in order to seize opportunities. Inspiration and impulses can also come from social partners and private actors, ranging from multinational firms to small and medium enterprises, which are often the source of the most original and innovative ideas.

The third message is that one of the best ways of plugging into global economy is through international co-operation and networking. We have been promoting European networks since the dawn of European regional policy. In recent years, however, we have seen an increasing demand for the involvement of local and regional government in international co-operation. We could see during OPEN DAYS how, through cooperation and networking, European regional policy supports a growing web of clusters, networks - and, yes, friendships - extending well beyond the Union's borders.

EU regional policy has become an internationally recognized model for policies and inter-state cooperation on territorial development. We have seen proof of this with the increasing presence of non-EU countries at OPEN DAYS.

Five of our seminars, organised together with representatives from Russia, China, Latin American countries, the World Bank and the OECD, have analysed regional development policies in a global context. We have also finalised agreements on a second stage of co-operation with Russia and Brazil.

We could also see the contribution that new forms of co-operation can bring to economic development. What is the link between UNIDO, Cordoba region in Argentine, Piedmont in Italy and goat milk? Well, these are the elements of partnership which resulted in a creative strategy for rural economic development in Cordoba region.

European regions and cities have also specific message on development policy - a development experience to share, and a know-how to transfer. That is also why the involvement of regional and local authorities in development cooperation with the Third World will be at the centre of the 3rd European Development Days, organized by my colleague Louis Michel in Strasbourg from 15 to 17 November.

The discussion on the future European regional policy gave us a fourth message which can be best summarised as: "we are on track". Everybody we're working with in regions and cities wants to see further changes, building on the last policy reform - more innovation, more networking and co-operation, more research and development, more entrepreneurship and sustainability.

This year's OPEN DAYS take place against a backdrop of international financial crisis and the uncertainties our citizens face in the immediate future. In the midst of this turmoil, cohesion policy stands out as offering stable support to the real economy, continuing to invest in SMEs, producing goods and services and creating new jobs in every region and city of the Union.

A dynamic single market needs a dynamic cohesion policy that supports long-term investment for growth in Europe, and that equips its citizens for the adjustments and social change that are part of how the markets work. This policy has to be available to all regions and citizens.

This takes me to my final message, concerning territorial cohesion and the Green Paper the Commission adopted on Monday. The key question is how to turn the diversity of the Union's territories into competitive advantage, how to unleash all economic opportunities throughout the Union and how to ensure that every territory contributes to its well-being, for the ultimate benefit of all our citizens.

OPEN DAYS has already given us some clues. In the past few days we have heard about competitive mountainous regions, innovative islands, creative rural areas. We are here to help Europe's 'ugly ducklings' grown into beautiful economies. The debate on territorial cohesion launched by the Green Paper will help us improve the competitiveness of all our territories and the well-being of our citizens, wherever they live. Let me remind you that we are holding an online consultation on the Green Paper until the end of next February and we hope that you will contribute.

Let me end up by reminding you about one more novelty – this year OPEN DAYS went truly local. Throughout the month of October, over 30 countries are hosting more than 230 local 'fringe' OPEN DAYS events, under the banner of "Europe in my region". We may be concluding the OPEN DAYS in Brussels, but the discussions here will continue throughout Europe.

I would like to finish by saying a big thank you for your encouragement, for your contributions to the debates and for coming.

I look forward to seeing you all again next year!