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Launch of Hiriko: a tribute to Diogo Vasconcelos

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Hiriko Global Mobility and tribute to Diogo Vasconcelos

Brussels, 24 January 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First let me wish you all a warm welcome.

I am particularly pleased and also moved by the presence of Diogo Vasconcelos' parents, Antonio and Maria Elisa Vasconcelos, as well as his dearest friends from the social innovation community.

We are meeting today to launch a project that was very close to Diogo's heart. Its name, which is by now very widely known, is Hiriko.

This is a small, folding and smart electric car but it is also much more than that.

It is European social innovation at its best.

Firstly, it is a successful example of how to give a new lease of life to traditional industrial sectors by contributing to address major modern societal challenges, in that specific case, urban mobility and pollution.

Secondly, it is a great combination of new business types of cooperation and employment opportunities with a strong social dimension.

Thirdly, it is an excellent illustration of the finest use that can be made of European social funds. Indeed Hiriko was initiated thanks to a European social fund project aiming at stimulating job creation in a disadvantaged area.

And last but not least, it is also a telling story on the crucial importance of promoting excellence, openness to new thinking and exchanges between the world of science and the world of business, as well as between Europe and our international partners. This is how we can best unleash the full potential of research and innovation.

Hiriko is the brain child of Professor Bill Mitchell from the MIT in the United States. Then it came to life thanks to the Social Innovation Park of Bilbao in the Basque Country. And it is now being implemented in major European cities such as Malmö, Berlin, Vitoria, Barcelona but also in San Francisco in the United States. I would like also to recognise the presence amongst us of the Mayor of Malmö and the Mayor of Vitoria.

In a nutshell, Hiriko is just the right kind of project for the right priority, fully contributing to the triple objective at the core of our Europe 2020 strategy that is "smart, sustainable and inclusive" growth, stimulating also job creation.

Diogo Vasconcelos would probably have added that it also shows that social innovation is not confined to, I am quoting what he said, "nice people doing small projects with little money", as he used to say. But that it is in fact capable of paving the way for large-scale social change. And indeed it is!

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

No need to say how much we would have loved Diogo to be with us today. His personal and professional gifts are missed by all of us.

Diogo was a person of outstanding energy and charisma. He never stopped thinking ahead, developing and connecting ideas and engaging with new people, always with one main objective in mind; a better future for all.

He was passionately committed to promote new ways of tackling challenges such as climate change, unemployment and ageing.

Diogo was indeed one of the most brilliant minds of his generation. And his inspirational voice had worldwide resonance, well beyond his native Portugal, my own country. Let me tell you on a very personal basis, because I was working with him when I was Prime Minister of Portugal, I was asking him to launch what in fact became a great success – the e-government program in Portugal. It became one of the leading examples in Europe; and also here when I invited him in some actions here in Europe. So I really miss him very much.

His vision of people learning from one another, and of transforming social needs and new technologies into economic opportunities succeeded in winning many of us over.

His spirit will continue to inspire the young generation of innovators and entrepreneurs for a long time.

And I am happy to announce that the European Commission will soon launch the "European Social innovation prize Competition in memory of Diogo Vasconcelos".

This yearly prize will contribute to encourage social innovators all over Europe to follow Diogo's steps and it would also be a befitting memorial to a man who departed too soon.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

We know too well from history that there is no sustainable path to growth and prosperity outside research and innovation.

This is a lesson to be nurtured not least at time of severe economic crisis, when competition with new economic powers is getting tougher and when more and more Europeans feel left behind.

We will not build our future on discipline and sanctions alone. We need discipline in Europe, yes, it is necessary, but we also need convergence and solidarity, we also need hope. That is why it is important at this time of crisis to highlight the possibilities for growth in Europe, the need for stability and growth. And innovation is precisely about turning new ideas into growth, prosperity, jobs and well-being.

In this field Europe starts from a position of strength but the stark reality is that we are not good enough. We are losing ground to some of our competitors so we have to do more and better and quicker.

And, as you know, that is why the European Commission has launched the Social Innovation Europe initiative. And Diogo Vasconcelos was at the forefront of it.

It aims at creating an innovation-friendly environment in particular by removing the bottlenecks for innovative ideas to be turned into products and services that create growth and jobs.

This includes proposals for the creation of unitary patent protection. And frankly, after 30 years of discussing this issue of the Community Patent, it's time to get it approved.

When, heads of state and governments will meet again in Brussels on next Monday, we should also concentrate on such concrete measures to stimulate growth and employment. I hope that this matter and others are going to be addressed during this summit.

Only an agenda based on growth and jobs can create the conditions necessary for hope in the future of Europe and also a better life for all our citizens.

But, let's be clear, the Europe 2020 strategy is now. It is now that we must frontload growth-enhancing structural reforms and invest in innovation to guide our economies towards new sources of growth and social cohesion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me close by quoting a French writer, Albert Camus, who once said that "la vraie générosité envers l'avenir consiste à tout donner au présent." Yes, we are working for the future, but we should be focused immediately on the present. This is a very important reminder of the need to act now.

That is exactly what social innovation is about. Social innovation is for the people and with the people. And it is nothing less than our capacity to create the future we aspire to. It is about solidarity and responsibility. Diogo Vasconcelos exemplified it so well!

Thank you for your attention.