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“Europe for Citizens: a structured dialogue”

The outcome of the Rhodes Conference – ‘Twinning for Tomorrow’s World’ – creation of links between actors, the contribution to the development of the twinning movement to the “cross fertilisation exercise”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the European Commission for inviting me to participate in this Forum.

I am very pleased to represent the Council of European Municipalities and Regions – particularly our twinning working group, which I Chair – in this “Europe for Citizens Forum 2007” on Intercultural Dialogue. We are particularly happy to see the place that is set aside in the programme for twinning, as a vital activity for intercultural dialogue.

This morning we were able to enjoy the ceremony of the Golden Stars awards, a part of which particularly concern twinning activities. I would like to congratulate the Commission on this initiative, which I believe is important and should be pursued. It constitutes a unique occasion to hear from grass-roots actors and to give an added value to their work. Indeed, I believe it is excellent to reward them for their important efforts, and CEMR was very proud to participate in the selection process of the awards.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have been asked to share with you today the outcome of the Conference CEMR organised in Rhodes this past May, “Twinning for Tomorrow’s World”. And I must say I am delighted to have this opportunity.

The Conference was a major success. This success would not have been possible without the close co-operation and support CEMR received from the European Commission. On behalf of our Organisation, I would like to thank you once again for your precious support.

It was a very important signal for twinning practitioners that the Conference was organised on the same date as the launching of the programme “Europe for Citizens” here in Brussels. A video-link in direct brought together the two events in Brussels and Rhodes. This was a highlight of our Conference’s opening session, and a dynamic way to show the important ties

between the two events. Another key moment in this context was the special session organised around the presentation of the new programme to the participants, and an exhibition organised by the Commission highlighting the role of networks for twinning.

These different initiatives, and the level of the representative speakers, clearly demonstrated to the participants the Commission's commitment to supporting the twinning movement. I wish to thank the Commission for this.

May I take a moment also to underline the support CEMR received from the main partners in this event: the city of Rhodes, our Greek association, as well as CEMR's national associations and their twinning co-ordinators. Their support and concrete assistance was crucial in the organisation of the Conference.

The Conference brought together some 500 participants – local elected representatives, twinning practitioners, citizens – coming from 24 European countries, and 4 non-European countries.

Personally, the greatest memory I took away from Rhodes is of the enthusiasm of all these participants who came from so many different countries, different cultures, with different languages and visions. These people came to the Conference to listen, share and contribute their experiences to build upon our great and common story which is Europe.

The Rhodes Conference was the real proof that twinings are true links between people: a real means to develop true European citizenship.

“Promoting cultural diversity and preserving the cultural heritage” was the theme of one of the parallel sessions of the Conference. In this session, we heard about the important initiatives taken in this aim. Here, as in all the other sessions, participants were able to exchange their perspectives and views on different issues which are of crucial importance for Europe and for our world:

- Twinning as a tool for social inclusion and active participation
- Twinning as an initiation to public life for young people
- Twinning as an instrument for a dynamic, social and sustainable Europe

It seems to me that the result of these sessions was to share the role of twinning in building a dynamic European citizenship, as a cross-roads of cultures and views in different fields.

Two sessions underlined the role of Europe in the world; a role which I am convinced can only be played if a stronger Union is achieved among us.

The special session on twinings as bridges for dialogue and peace around the Mediterranean was a moment of emotional exchange between representatives from Israel and the Palestinian Authority. I would like to share with you what I found to be a particularly striking sentiment expressed by the Israeli representative during this debate: he told the participants and the

panel which included his Palestinian counterpart, “We want to construct bridges, and not walls anymore”.

This session was at the origin of a proposal from the Union of Local Authorities in Israel to host in 2008 a session on twinning and the dialogue for peace between Israelis and Palestinians – a possibility which CEMR is currently studying with interest. We hope to be successful in this. This would be a concrete example of how twinning can contribute to intercultural dialogue.

It is clear that Rhodes was an occasion for people to come together, join their ideas, hopes, visions, share experiences. It was moreover an occasion for lively and concrete exchanges between practitioners. This was an occasion to show how the links between peoples, which twinning creates, provide a unique means by which we can respond to the challenges that our changing world presents us with.

The need to work together was clearly shown by the success of the partnership meeting-point. Over the 3 days of meetings, this was almost constantly full of representatives from local authorities looking to find new partners with whom to set up new co-operation projects. The success of this stand, I believe, serves as another clear demonstration of twinning as a source of intercultural dialogue and exchange.

The Rhodes Conference was also a major gathering of actors who are particularly committed to Europe. In different ways, from different organisations and in different fields, speakers from Institutions, NGOs, towns, universities, schools, specialised agencies and associations contributed actively to the Conference. In this way, I believe that Rhodes was a real expression of the core objectives of the “Europe for Citizens” programme, and of cross-fertilisation links for Europe.

The strength of our Europe is its diversity, its different cultures, rich history, all its different languages. We need to preserve all of this, since reinforcing European identity is vital for Europe’s strength. To do so, we must continue to exchange our views and ideas to better understand each other and develop real dialogue. Twinning is an excellent tool for this. I am confident that “Europe for Citizens” is a very good programme in this respect and will give an opportunity to different actors to work together in this aim. I believe that 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue is a unique opportunity to put this into practice.

Personally and as a representative of CEMR, I can assure you that we will continue to work with the European Commission in this direction.

Thank you.