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Territorial Cooperation: A key element for the future of Cohesion Policy

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

Celebrating 20 Years of Territorial Cooperation and looking
beyond 2013

Tournai, 1st October 2010

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Tournai. I would first and not least like to thank the Belgian presidency and indeed, Rudy Demotte, for organising this conference, which takes place appropriately enough in a border region. It brings together people from all over Europe who share a vision: We can make Europe a better, a more competitive, greener and a more inclusive place if we join forces and get together to resolve the issues we face. You all believe that the whole should be more than the sum of its parts and I fully subscribe to this vision, which is after all, at the heart of the European project.

20 years after the beginning of INTERREG and European Territorial Co-operation this objective has lost none of its importance. On the contrary, the global financial and economic crisis clearly showed that we need to step up our efforts to overcome structural deficits and to work better across national, regional and local borders. At the same time global challenges like climate change, energy insecurity and demographic trends do not stop at our borders and call for joint action.

That's why we must frontload the growth-promoting reforms set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy. If we speed up reforms now, growth levels could rise by over a third by 2020, allowing the European Union to come out of the crisis stronger than before.

We must all aim to turn the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy more resilient to external shocks.

Regional Policy should therefore be closely aligned with the Europe 2020 strategy. Our work can ensure that community action is translated into real development on the ground. First, because it provides a framework for cross-sectoral approaches adapted to specific contexts. Second, because it offers a unique system of multi-level governance mobilising a wide range of regional and local stakeholders.

European Territorial Co-operation is a key element in Regional Policy's contribution to the Europe 2020 strategy. It allows for the establishment of integrated and cross-sectoral development strategies even beyond national borders. It can help to make the Single market function better and thus improve conditions for growth. With its transnational strand it can optimise transport planning, promoting "cleaner" and ecologically sustainable transport modes across borders. It can help maximise local potential for example where a number of communes produce renewable energy. Interregional co-operation can bring together these actors and foster the mutual learning process necessary to achieve the aims of Europe 2020.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The added value of European Territorial Co-operation is largely undisputed. This was highlighted by Member states' representatives in the High level group last June.

However, we also know that improvements are needed in order to exploit the potential more fully. If we want to further raise the profile- including the financial one - there are two main elements that we need to address: we need a more strategic approach to co-operation and we need to better adapt the implementation frame to co-operation needs.

What do I mean with a more strategic approach? First of all, European Territorial Co-operation needs to be more firmly embedded in strategic frameworks at all levels, be they European, national or regional. We need to pay more attention to the role ETC can play and integrate this dimension into all strategic planning.. This is the only way to ensure coherence and complementarity between ETC and other policies and programmes, and to avoid an inefficient fragmentation of funding.

Such a strategic approach also needs to be adopted when it comes to programme preparation: ETC programmes do not exist in isolation but have strong links to the Convergence and Competitiveness programmes. The same goes for other sectoral policies and programmes that may exist in the programme area, such as e.g. innovation, environment or transport. All these elements need to be born in mind when establishing a programme strategy, in order to maximise the impact.

We should also look at the strategic objectives of our programmes. To be effective, co operation programmes should focus on a limited number of priorities based on real needs of the co-operation area, as far as possible aligned with Europe 2020..

Furthermore, we need to be in a better position to "tell the story" of what co-operation achieves. Based on a clear definition of programme objectives, we need to be able establish when or to what extent these objectives have actually been reached. There is a widespread feeling that the indicators we are using do not adequately reflect what is happening in programmes. Therefore, I want to work with you on how to give a better picture of co-operation to the outside world.

Macro-regional strategies are another avenue of reinforced strategic cooperation. I am convinced that such an approach can yield substantial added value. Strengthening the link to transnational co-operation programmes could be useful in many cases. We are carefully monitoring the progress of the Baltic Strategy already underway, and will keep a close eye on the results of the Danube strategy when it is launched. The perspective for this approach will depend on the results these two pioneer regions achieve.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In November this year where I will set out my broad ideas for the future of this important policy.

In the reforms I propose then, I will suggest that we broadly keep the current architecture of territorial co operation, divided into cross-border, transnational and interregional, since each of the strands has its own objectives and "raison d'être". This seems to be the wish of representatives in the High level group and others.

Secondly, I want to see co operation on an equal footing with the other objectives of Regional policy. It should not be an afterthought or a poor relation, and should be kept in mind throughout the regulatory framework for structural funds.

Thirdly, we need to simplify procedures. Co operation is necessarily more complex than other regional policy activities, and we need to make sure that the programme and project manager are able to concentrate on delivering results, rather than spending time on administrative requirements.

Fourthly, we need to review current arrangements for cross-border co-operation at the external borders of the Union. As you know, this type of co-operation is governed by different rules and instruments and it would be worthwhile to have a dedicated discussion on experience gained to date, involving the Member States and the Commission services concerned.

Finally, I would also like to highlight the role of the European Groupings for Co-operation (EGTC). 16 EGTCs have so far been set up and 16 more are in the pipeline. Their range of activity is very varied: Some are established for the implementation of a very concrete project (such as the running of a cross-border hospital), one has now been set up to implement a Territorial Co-operation programme and a number of EGTCs provide an "umbrella" or an overall frame for a broad range of co-operation activities. I would particularly underline the pioneer work of Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai in creating one of the first and best-known of all EGTCs.

EGTCs are particularly useful between regions where the legal systems are quite different. I think we should explore this approach more widely.

The Commission will provide a report on the application of the EGTC regulation by next summer and make proposals for amendments of the regulation where necessary with a view to further strengthen and facilitate the use of EGTCs. We do of course, welcome your views and experience as we work on this report.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To conclude I would like to draw your attention to one important issue. As you may be aware the debate about the future of Regional Policy is entering a decisive phase. The reform proposals I have already mentioned, come on the eve of the debate about the future EU-budget. Have no illusions, the budget negotiations are going to be tough.

Too often, Territorial Co operation is regarded as a luxury item – nice – but expendable. We need to ensure that all governments well understand the added value of Cooperation programmes, if we are to protect the budget needed to continue making it a success.

I believe all of us here today are allies in this particular endeavour – and I count on your support. Thank you!