

Professor Danuta HÜBNER

European Commissioner for Regional Policy

Opening Session of the OPEN DAYS 2007

8 October 2007, Charlemagne building, Salle "GASP"

Making it Happen: New Cohesion Policy contributes to Growth and Jobs in Europe

Dear President, Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

When we met last year we were discussing together a new cohesion policy which was still "in the making". This year, I am proud to say that, together, we are "Making it happen". Over the last months the new cohesion policy, with its focus on growth and jobs, has gradually and convincingly been turned into reality. Since the last Open Days in October 2006, all Member States have agreed their national plans, the so-called National Strategic Reference Frameworks, with the Commission. More than 130 national and regional programmes have been decided and their implementation has begun. Another 300 programmes will be decided in the weeks to come.

What lesson can we draw from these documents? Do they really deliver a new cohesion policy?

Perhaps the most important change brought by our policy reform is its thematic concentration **on key drivers of the Lisbon agenda**. Furthermore, the new cohesion policy is not intended to operate through a number of isolated sectoral programmes, such as transport, environment or research and development. To the contrary, it has been designed on the basis of an integrated approach to regional development whereby the ultimate criterion is its impact on growth, competitiveness and jobs.

And I have a good news to tell you. The targets of "earmarking" – an approach agreed by the Member States which decided that the dominant part of cohesion policy resources should be invested in the renewed growth and jobs agenda – have been achieved. The average proportion for key Lisbon investments represents over 61% of the resources under the "Convergence" objective and 76% under the "Regional Competitiveness and Employment" objective.

Importantly, even new Member States complied with the earmarking thresholds, although for them the targets were not obligatory. This demonstrates that the new approach is attractive and corresponds to real needs of regions and Member States, old and new.

We can all legitimately take pride in the achievements of the past and work hard to make foreseen results become a reality. But, at the same time, we also need to prepare for the longer term. This is why while we should begin discussing emerging **challenges and their consequences for the future of cohesion policy**.

4th Cohesion Report depicts the European territory at the crossroads of important changes, which will impact on regional economies and on regional development in the near and more distant future. Many of them are external, such as accelerating globalisation, rising energy prices, immigration pressure or climate change. Others are more indigenous in nature, such as population ageing or the necessity to foster economic modernisation.

At the 4th Cohesion Forum which took place two weeks ago, European politicians for the first time discussed how these new challenges may influence regional development and what sort of development strategies would best meet them. Perhaps the most important, first conclusion was that this global context gives a new meaning to catching up and makes the role of external developments more prominent than today.

In other words, we cannot look only at comparisons and convergence within the Union. The role of the European cohesion policy must increasingly focus on regional economies finding their place in world markets, in crucial global networks and clusters; allowing them to measure their strengths and weaknesses against global challenges and opportunities and fostering their internationalisation.

We need cohesion policy in which the “catching-up” of the less developed with the better off regions depends on jointly moving forward in an increasingly globalised and open economy. It is a vision that stresses opportunities for the future by generating new comparative advantages which are today man made, by mobilising underexploited

potential, rather than compensating for the problems of the past. With our recent reform we made an important step in this direction.

The conclusions of the 4th Cohesion Forum also refer to the necessity to make the policy more performance based; to further improve governance structures involving European, national, regional and local levels; finally, to give the notion of territorial cohesion a new and coherent policy framework.

This is all fine. But the policy recommendations cannot be developed only by the politicians; we need your opinion, we need a view coming from policy practitioners, from businessmen, from people who are turning the policy into reality on the ground. All the changes and new developments eventually boil down to one thing – regional development. So, how do you see the main challenges for the development of your regions and cities? What are the advantages which should allow them to stay competitive in the global game in the 21st century and what is needed to make full use of these advantages?

These are the questions which, I hope, will be at the centre of the OPEN DAYS 2007. So, let me finally say some words about our programme for the coming days. I am told that we have again passed all benchmarks of last year with more than 5,000 registered participants, 150 seminars and 700 speakers. I am also told, that we stimulated this year about 100 seminars in 25 countries under the “OPEN DAYS” logo. “Going local” has obviously become another important element of our event which - I am convinced - should be developed even more in the future.

The OPEN DAYS is a unique success story which proves the added value and potential of EU cohesion policy. It is perhaps the best illustration of another catchword of the new policy, which is partnership and co-operation. Today we live in a world where regional economic development requires co-operation which transcends traditional boundaries between various actors of economic development. In this way the best available knowledge is pooled, shared and turned into creative and innovative solutions, enhancing the competitiveness of European regions and the Union as a whole.

Your presence here is the best proof of it. OPEN DAYS attract diverse national, regional and local institutions, business people, representatives of banking institutions and NGOs. They facilitate exchange of views on growth strategies, on innovation, on new ideas for regional development. For “making it happen” we have to work together. The cohesion policy is and must remain everybody's business.

Globalisation which is today a fact of life means also new opportunities for co-operation which should not be constrained by the Union's borders. More and more the OPEN DAYS become the annual “rendezvous” for all those interested and involved in regional development. This morning I had the pleasure to host a seminar with a high-level delegation from China and tomorrow we shall continue with an enlarged seminar involving high-level delegations from Russia, Brazil and other countries, as well as the OECD and other institutions. It shows that the success of EU cohesion policy has made it a model for other countries and world regions.

I would like to thank all organisers, partners, speakers and colleagues involved for their enthusiasm and commitment over the last months. For the days to come, I wish all those involved the best success.

Thank you very much for your attention.