WELCOME SPEECH
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Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning, warmly welcome to Brussels and to this, the first Commission seminar on urban-rural links.

I am pleased to see that so many of you representing such a broad range of stakeholders (public, NGOs, academia) and from all parts of the European Union have been able to make it to Brussels today and I am looking very much forward to hear what you have to say on the topic of urban-rural relations.

This seminar comes at a crucial time - a time when European, national and regional policies are increasingly stressing the need to address issues related to urban-rural linkages.

Urban and rural development have, for decades, been conceived and shaped as different strands of spatial policies. Integrated approaches to what we call regional development are, until these days, rather perceived through the lens of growth poles and urban centres, whereas the common concept of rural development has – and I think it is fair to say still is - strongly influenced by the agricultural perspective, despite the introduction of the second pillar of the CAP.

This separation has lead to differences in thematic focus and to a divide in the development and implementation of policies. As a result, it has been difficult to take an integrated approach to the specific challenges faced in the urban-rural space.
However, with increased interaction and communication between town and countryside the urban-rural divide has become less obvious. The traditional boundary between urban and rural has become blurred. As a result, the separation of policies seems more and more outdated and a feature of the past. All this makes the urban-rural polarity an obsolete analytical distinction.

Consequently, in the debates on competitive territories and sustainable regional development, a growing interest can now be sensed in reconciling the policy strands into a coherent policy field focusing on the functional area which covers both urban and rural parts and which we could label “sustainable regional development”.

The issue of urban-rural relations features in the Leipzig Charter agreed by EU Member States in May last year. And it is included in the Territorial Agenda as the second of six priorities as well as in its Action Programme for implementation.

The Action Programme is primarily focused on territorial issues but recognizes that integrated urban development and territorial cohesion policies each make complementary contributions to implementing the aims of sustainable development. Integration of the spatial and urban development policies also arises from the need to create and implement new forms of urban-rural partnerships, along with the new forms of multi-level territorial governance.

The process will be monitored by ESPON which, as many of you may be aware, already carried out an exhaustive study on “Urban-Rural Relations in Europe” (ESPON 2004) which among other things included an exhaustive discussion on the definition of what is urban and what is rural.

In the context of the CAP health check and Cohesion policy review, the Sustainable Development Strategy and the Territorial Agenda, the European
The commission would like to contribute to the dialogue on urban and rural linkages and we would like to do this together with you.

The aim of the initiative of which we see the opening of today is to launch a debate focusing on urban-rural issues as well as to take stock of, disseminate and learn from experience already existing in this particular field. This will enable the developing and pulling together of international knowledge and expertise in the field to ensure that we all have access to strong and independent analysis when we develop our policies for the years to come.

Our event on urban-rural linkages enhancing European territorial competitiveness will be followed by a seminar on sustainable development planned for the end of 2008 and yet another seminar on social cohesion to be arranged during the first part of 2009. The whole exercise will culminate in 2009 with a conference on urban-rural issues. But it does not end there. We hope that our initiative will help to once and for all put the urban-rural issues firmly on the policy agenda and that it will provide valuable input for addressing the specific challenges faced in the urban-rural functional areas.

The topic of our seminar here today is urban-rural linkages enhancing European territorial competitiveness. The opening session however also serves as a kick-off for the whole series of events. In this respect I am very happy to have my colleague from DG AGRI here, Josefine Loriz-Hoffmann, who will provide us with an account of the experience of the LEADER Community initiative. This will be followed by Professor Marc Shucksmith who will share with us his broad experience of dealing with urban-rural issues.

The rest of the day will be fully dedicated to the specific theme of urban-rural linkages enhancing European territorial competitiveness. It is interesting to note that despite the divisions at policy level urban-rural relations have been
developed through many projects on the ground across Europe and today this will be illustrated through three cases from different parts of the European Union.

Our colleagues from Northumbria University and ICLEI will introduce presentations from the Netherlands, Slovakia-Austria and Germany:

- We will learn more about the Amsterdam Food Strategy

- We will get insight into the cooperation between the booming Slovak capital city of Bratislava and its rural hinterland in the state of Lower Austria.

- And we will get an account of what is being done for supporting business clusters, innovation and knowledge through the Eifel Initiative in Germany that brings together actors in a rural area and surrounding cities.

We have ensured there is plenty of time for discussion and reflection on the projects that will be presented since this is indeed one of the main aims of the seminar.

In this respect I would like to welcome Professor Bob Ewans from Northumbria University (UK) who kindly has agreed to facilitate today's seminar and I am sure Bob will do his utmost to make you all participate actively in the debate.

I look forward to hear your views and questions.

Thank you very much for your attention!