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Local Development Strategies and Cooperation
Brussels, 27th April 2012

"The participatory territorial approach is essential to local development"

[Ladies and gentlemen,]

Hello and welcome to Brussels for this European Network for Rural Development seminar. The local development approach LEADER is very important to me and plays an important role in the CAP. The evolution of LEADER since its creation has shown that collective, local initiatives could come to drive development in rural zones, and even beyond. It encourages us to continue and even to move things up a gear in the coming CAP.

Today, you are more than 200 local action groups, representing some 2300 groups which exist across the EU. Firstly, I want to congratulate you and thank you for the work you do, encourage you to continue and to share your experiences, so that this positive dynamic can be sustained.

Today's seminar is not an academic meeting, but primarily a day for sharing experiences. These exchanges will be useful beyond sharing among yourselves. More than that, it will help to improve our local development strategy and to further develop them in the future. You possess a wealth of knowledge which could help us immensely in the coming months and years.

Studies have been conducted within the ENRD to identify the keys to success. These will be presented to you. But each of you must also contribute his or her own experiences and expertise. Networks are a special aspect of the LEADER approach. It helps this concept of community to succeed. It has taken root on the ground, sprouted and then been scattered to produce the fruit we see today.

LEADER has become a benchmark model on which we can now start to build on a larger scale. This is why I proposed to further expand the LEADER programme in the post-2013 CAP. In particular, we've proposed a LEADER start-up kit, which will allow Member States to further boost and facilitate the launch of new projects. I believe it is important to make things as simple as possible initially to encourage people to be a part of this LEADER approach. And that they can then benefit from all the complex expertise that you've accumulated up until now.

Similarly, a multifund approach, that is, increased coordination between different European public funding bodies should create leverage for a real territorial approach. This could provide better connections between rural and urban spheres. In many regions in Europe, we can no longer

ignore the strong, intrinsic connections between rural zones and small towns spread out around those areas. These can no longer be isolated on an administrative level when this does not reflect reality. This is what gives importance to this cooperation between rural and urban. I think the LEADER approach can contribute towards this.

The participatory territorial approach is essential to local development. It must be supported across Europe.

To conclude, I want to emphasise one point which needs to be further developed in coming years. Namely, cooperation on a transnational level.

Every local action group should be encouraged to take part in a transnational project, to be inspired by what has been done elsewhere, and to innovate in their own territory. I believe that the added value for local action groups, in exchanging information on a European level could be significant. Across the European Network for Rural Development there are many success stories. Especially by using the Internet, tools have allowed us to exchange many things.

Today, you may also address the issue of integrating European added value in local projects. I'm sure that this could have very positive effects, both for economic players and for all the groups involved in this project. I hope you have a good seminar.

Enjoy the work and be inspired, and I hope for good results for you but also for all of us who are involved in this approach.

Thank you.