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**Making connections for a better rural development policy**

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

**Conference on rural networks**

**Brussels, 30 March 2009**

[Ladies and gentlemen],

It's a pleasure for me to "start the ball rolling" at this seminar. Let me welcome you very warmly on behalf of the European Commission.

It's good to see that the process of "networking" over rural development policy has been moving forwards since we launched the European Network for Rural Development last October in Cyprus.

In terms of organisation, there's still work to be done - but the main initial topics for discussion are clear, much of the administrative framework is in place, and I'm sure that this conference will give everything a healthy push forwards.

I remember that, when we launched the European Network, I talked about the importance of ideas. I stand by those comments.

I'm not sure where this quote comes from, but someone once said: "Lack of money is no obstacle; but lack of an idea **is** an obstacle."

Well, that's not entirely true: I'm certainly not going to claim that money is unimportant! (If I did, I think several million European farmers would contradict me rather loudly....)

But the second half of the statement is true. Without ideas, we have no policy. As we exchange ideas, they grow in value and they breed success stories. Ideas made Europe great: look at the Industrial Revolution.

I'm not expecting the European Network to achieve successes on quite that scale! But I'm firmly convinced that it will make a strong contribution to the ongoing success of our rural development policy. Its annual budget of € 9 million will be money well spent.

I've said before that, in some ways, rural development policy is "where the music will be" in future.

Our citizens really identify with the goals of this policy. They want to see their countryside well looked after. They want the possibility of a good quality of life in rural areas, if they choose to live there. And they're concerned about emerging challenges like climate change.

For these reasons and others, whatever shape the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) may take after 2013, I can't imagine that rural development policy will play a more modest role than it does now. Its role is far more likely to grow.

As we think ahead to the future, we also need to keep our feet on the ground in the present. We need to know how well our policy is working in practice. After all, practice can be seen as a more advanced form of theory!

Certainly, Member States and regions are sending us annual reports about the successes (and partial successes!) of their rural development programmes. But the European Network can complement this feedback work in a very valuable way – by involving a wide range of stakeholders rather than just "authorities", by reporting in a more "qualitative" way, and of course by actually making suggestions.

The three topics taken up by the thematic working groups are certainly good starting-points for discussion. I'm particularly interested in what will emerge with regard to "public goods", because I suspect that this concept will be more important than ever in the CAP after 2013.

I'm also very interested in the Network's plan to screen rural development programmes to see how well they have addressed the challenges of combating climate change and adapting to it.

As you know, this week the Commission will publish a working document about the likely impact of climate change on agriculture, and about what we can do in response. Also, the hours are ticking away towards this year's United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held in Copenhagen.

The European Union must set a good and clear example in its efforts to face up to climate change. This involves many sorts of contribution from many parties – from policy-makers to individual citizens. The work of the European Network in examining rural development programmes can make a difference.

Overall, I've got high hopes for what the European Network for Rural Development can achieve.

Don't worry; you're not carrying the future of our rural development policy on your shoulders alone! But as a forum for free and imaginative debate and analysis, I'm sure the Network will prove its worth many times over in the years ahead.

Thank you, and enjoy the seminar.