

ERIK Final Conference - Knowledge for Regional Innovation

Keynote speech by Dirk Ahner

11 May 2007 - 09.30 - 11.00

Dear Regional Minister Brenna,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentleman,

I am delighted to have been invited to the final Conference of the ERIK network. Your attendance in such numbers confirms your commitment and interest in sharing lessons from your experiences, in learning from other regions and in making contacts for future work. In a word, networking.

I very much support networks like ERIK, as a lot of innovations have derived from sharing knowledge and working together for a common objective. Innovation needs the interaction between the different stakeholders. These interactions should bring operational partnerships to transform knowledge into marketable new products or services which is the objective as innovation is a means of bringing 'growth and jobs'.

As you know, ERIK is a network directly supported by the Commission since 2003 through the 'Innovative Actions' programme. It has successfully organised many useful networking events like study visits, working groups and conferences. We appreciate very much the work of ERIK who supported our message that innovation is important for regional development. The regions participating to the network learned a lot from ERIK. We hope that this knowledge will not be lost. This is why we welcome very much ERIK's publication titled "Knowledge and Innovation for Regional Growth: Policy recommendations based on European good practices", which draws the lessons and highlights good practices from its experience.

In this speech, I will start sharing some thoughts on networks, then I will update you on the latest initiatives we have taken to share experiences and finally, I will present the competition that we are organising to reward innovative projects.

Networks

Networks are about people, therefore having the right people involved is crucial: it is the ability to collaborate properly that matters. An effective network comprises participants who have knowledge to share, who are willing to do so and, very importantly, who are ready to invest resources (namely time) in transforming the knowledge gained into concrete actions.

Networks are about sharing knowledge. As there are different sources of knowledge, it is important to be able to include as broad a range of knowledge-holders as possible. This means that there should be variety in the members of a network.

Networks need a certain enthusiasm from members. They should be ready to meet people and discuss openly with them. However, this enthusiasm is something that has to be built step by step. At the start, people are unsure about what they can get, unsure about what they can bring and above all unsure about the new ideas that they will be presented. Therefore, time is an important condition for a network to be fruitful. With time, a network can become a credible source of knowledge and partners and in turn can attract new members.

Latest initiatives

As I said, I will now update you on the latest initiatives we have taken to share experiences. These initiatives fall under the umbrella of the 'Regions for economic change'. Since it was launched in November 2006, the 'Regions for economic change' has generated a lot of attention and a very positive welcome.

In short, 'Regions for economic change' has four main proposals:

- (1) First, regions are encouraged to network around the thirty priority themes proposed by the Commission's services. This follows the experience of the Interract and Urbact programmes which have provided a wealth of experience and knowledge to the regions.
- (2) Second, we advocate a two way bridge between the mainstream programmes and the networking activities. Gaining experience and knowledge is not sufficient. It has to be transformed in action. This is why regions participating to the networks should implement the good ideas through their mainstream programmes. In parallel, they should share their

experience of the mainstream programmes through the networks.

- (3) Third, and following the logic of the previous point, we have offered to actively support the networks that are committed to disseminating and mainstreaming the results at EU level through the 'fast-track option'. This means that the Commission would participate and contribute to the work of the network.
- (4) Fourth, we, in the Commission, will reinforce our efforts to communicate and disseminate the results at EU level.

Since we announced the 'Regions for economic change' initiative, there have been very positive responses from the regions. The interest is particularly high for the 'fast-track option'. This name, 'fast-track option' refers to the ambition to have good ideas tested and implemented quickly.

How will it work? Under Interreg IVC and Urbact, the Managing Authorities will launch calls for proposals for networks around the thirty themes already identified by the Commission's services. Then, the Commission will be consulted and will indicate which ones could fall under the 'fast-track option'. It is the Monitoring Committee who will ultimately decide on the networks to be selected.

I am conscious that a lot of expectation has been generated around the 'Regions for economic change' initiative and we will maintain our support to the regions in order to make a success of it!

RegioStars

Finally, I would like to talk to you about RegioStars, a competition organised by DG Regional Policy to highlight the best innovative projects.

RegioStars is a new and important initiative. It will be organised every year, each time focusing on different themes to enable as many innovative projects as possible to participate. For the 2008 awards, we are giving prominence to two themes: "knowledge and technological innovation" and "sustainable economic development".

RegioStars is open to all regions that have received ERDF or pre-accession funding. Each regional managing authority can submit one project. The deadline is the 29 June 2007. The jury will comprise experts in the fields covered.

Why are we organising this competition?

Over the past three years, I had the opportunity to visit many very interesting projects financed by the regional policy. Talking to project holders has reinforced my conviction that regional policy has a clear impact on the daily life of Europe's citizens. But too often, when talking about regional policy, the public understands "money transfers". This is unfortunate as the end results of our policy are really the projects implemented by enthusiastic people who generate growth and jobs. And whilst infrastructures, like roads, are visible outputs, this is not so much the case in the field of innovation. This is why we wanted to identify and communicate the good projects through the RegioStars awards: to showcase the impact of regional policies on the regions and their citizens through concrete examples. We would like to see original and innovative projects highlighted because they can be attractive and inspiring to other regions.

I believe, this is an exciting opportunity for the regions to showcase their hidden stars, to benefit from the recognition of their successes and above all to celebrate the innovation spirit.

It is stimulating, it is innovative and can be rewarding through a positive image of your region!

So, I encourage you to participate in RegioStars!

In conclusion, I just want to reiterate the message that networking is a great opportunity for innovation due to the exchange of knowledge and also due to the opportunities to meet new partners to work with. But, please keep in mind that the ultimate goal is to transform this into action!

I wish you all a highly productive conference!