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Tools in the toolbox: ICT and broadband in rural areas

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

Conference on Broadband in Rural Areas

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to join you this morning.

I won't start by saying that the theme of this conference is important, because this should be clear from the fact that no fewer than four Commissioners will have spoken about it here by the end of today!

I'm adding my voice to those of my colleagues because I believe that information technology is thoroughly relevant to the countryside, not only to the urban environment.

This point emerges rather amusingly in a French film which came out in 2001 under the title *Une hirondelle a fait le printemps*.

In the film, Adrien, an ageing farmer in the Rhône-Alpes region, decides to retire and sell his mountain farm. But he is rather surprised by the buyer who steps forward – Sandrine, a chic young Parisienne who wants to escape from her ICT career in the French capital.

Sandrine doesn't get a friendly reaction from the other local farmers. But in the end, Adrien defends her. As he points out: whereas they have been sitting around in their favourite bar, complaining about the state of the market, Sandrine has been actually making money - by selling goat's cheese to German buyers via the internet.

The farmers find this innovation hard to accept. And likewise, I think we sometimes have to remind ourselves that the countryside can benefit from new solutions to its challenges, just like our towns and cities.

I often mention that more than half of the citizens of the European Union live in rural areas.

This fact has heavy implications for national and regional authorities, who have to provide public services to these people to the same standard as in towns and cities.

It also has heavy implications for our Lisbon Agenda for jobs and economic growth. The Lisbon Agenda will succeed much more fully if we use it to energise and help the **whole** of the European population – including the rural half.

And it has to be said that, for the time being, some rural areas are underperforming in economic terms. In the rural areas of the European Union of 25 Member States, gross domestic product per head is only two-thirds of the level of urban areas. The service sector is also under-developed.

We must look these hard facts in the face. But let's also look at the other side of the coin.

There is untapped energy in the countryside: there are strong, enterprising people who can do valuable work if the economic environment allows it.

There are also plenty of people who would love to leave their urban home for something rather greener and quieter – bringing ideas, skills and capital with them - if they didn't have a fear that this would mean returning to the Dark Ages in terms of available technology.

High-quality internet access is one of tools with which we can unlock more of the potential of our rural areas, and make them more viable places for people to live in.

I say this, first, on the basis of comparison with our towns and cities.

The internet seems to have pervaded almost every aspect of our lives in the urban environment. It seems hard to imagine an office without web access. And at home, if you're new in town and you want to look for a gym or a salsa club, the internet may be your first source of inspiration. Even online dating has exploded in recent years.

Of course, the countryside is different from the town. But in some ways, it's not so very different. Many rural businesses, both agricultural and non-agricultural, need rapid access to diverse kinds of information, just like their urban counterparts. Also, teleworking is even more valuable in remote areas than in large population centres. And online dating could have particular appeal for a farmer who feels in need of a wife (or a husband) but doesn't have much spare time for hanging out in rural nightclubs (if there are any).

The value of good ICT infrastructure has also become clear in practice. Alongside the trend of urbanisation in the European Union, we can also see "counter-urbanisation" in some regions, as people actually pursue that dream of a greener life. The presence of good ICT infrastructure in a given area appears to be a major factor that makes this possible.

Where does my area of policy fit into all this?

As you know, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is not only about farming. The so-called "second pillar" of the CAP is rural development policy, designed to address the needs of the countryside as a whole.

For the period 2007 to 2013, our rural policy is moulded around three broad themes, which are:

- first, improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry;
- secondly, improving the environment and the countryside; and
- thirdly, the quality of life in rural areas, and diversification of the rural economy.

ICT in general is highly relevant to the first and the third of these themes. It helps existing businesses to perform tasks more effectively and efficiently; it creates greater scope for new businesses to start up; and it makes it easier to deliver vital services.

Therefore, in its guidance on rural development programmes for 2007 to 2013, the Commission has strongly encouraged national and regional governments to take a close look at how they can encourage greater use of ICT, including broadband.

I should clarify that rural development policy does not primarily target ICT infrastructure: this is covered more fully by other Community funds.

In general, rural development money is used to help and encourage businesses, public bodies and individuals to make the most of ICT infrastructure once this is in place. This often involves providing computer hardware or training.

Mr Sivenas has already given you some examples of successful projects carried out with rural development funds. I'm always impressed by the range of people who benefit from these initiatives.

In one project pursued in recent years – in three municipalities in Portugal – a network of internet access points, computers and scanners was created to familiarise the rural population in general with new ICT systems and to help them access services.

In a project in Spain, it was shepherds in the Basque Country who benefited from ICT equipment.

And in part of Ireland, computer training was provided to farmers and to women. Where the women were unable to access training through traditional channels for a number of reasons, the training facilities were made available in "mobile" form.

Overall, in this area of rural policy, ICT and broadband, we are still experimenting to some extent: it's early days. But I think it's quite appropriate to experiment.

It's obvious that effective use of broadband access in our towns and cities has brought enormous gains. As I have argued, it's reasonable to assume that it could also bring benefits to the countryside. To me, it makes good sense to spend very modest sums of public money to help assess potentially large gains.

So with regard to rural policy and broadband, we have launched the boat, and we will see where it goes. But I strongly believe that wider and better use of broadband will have a clear positive impact. It's a valuable tool in the rural toolbox. Now it's up to the Member States to help people use it through their rural development programmes.

One thing is certain: we will need good theoretical back-up from experts like yourselves. In this area, as in others, there will be pioneers in any case – like Sandrine, our IT-consultant-turned-farmer. But if we want larger groups to follow the pioneers, policy-makers must do their work well, on the basis of thorough analysis.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much indeed for your attention, and if you haven't already done so, I invite you to take a look at the DG Agri stand here at this conference, where you can find further details about what I've talked about. I guarantee that the computer there has reliable broadband access!

Thank you.