

## **Ann-Sofi Backgren – Speech**

### **Future Opportunities and Challenges for Cross Border Co-operation**

Europe today is a mixture of countries, regions, languages, cultures and people. Soon 27 countries will be 28 and more countries are knocking on the EU-door. European Union is with it's diversity a challenge for the future. But probably many people also know that diversity is the key to development and growth.

European border regions form a very interesting piece in the EU-puzzle, the missing piece or the main piece. Many people have already talked about border regions as EU laboratories, and yes, they are right. In border regions people from both side of the border are since a long time cooperating, more or less. I am coming myself from Finland, from the western part of Finland. My home region has a maritime border to Sweden, so the sea has both given my home region over the years many new possibilities but sometimes also obstacles. As a Swedish speaking Finn it is easy for me to cooperate with Sweden because we speak the same language. But even if we speak the same language and I have been grown up with the Swedish culture, still there can be obstacles. For example when we make decisions. I will try to explain it in a simple way. In Finland we make faster decisions than in Sweden and then we start to try to implement them after the decision-making. In Sweden they discuss in bigger communities and then they take the decisions more collectively. Why? One answer can be; when Finland had the wartime with Russia in the beginning of the 1940s, Finland had to learn to make fast decisions and try to believe that they were the right ones. Sweden did not have the same experiences as Finland had, and still today we can see tracks how we behave in decision-making positions. As I said this was a simple example but what I wanted to say it that history still affects how we behave today in many ways in the cross-border cooperation situations. So if you don't know about the history, you can't work with future issues in an honest way. You have to know about what is said between the sentences, the differences in the culture and social aspects. If you don't know who you are and in which framework you live and work, how can you then work with future challenges?

The young people of today are the ambassadors of tomorrow. We are facing a growing unemployment especially among young people. If border regions can use its diversity on a progressive way, border regions can turn the negative unemployment spiral to a more positive one. Why not create young laboratories for cross-border cooperation, in a new thinking way. Ask them

to use their storytelling to get out new ideas for cross-border regions. How would the future cross-border regions look like? What do people do in the border regions in the future, what are they studying, what kind of enterprises do they set up. In which fields do they cooperate especially with each other? I think we should activate young people in the cross-border cooperation more than we do today.

The more people travel and learn outside the box, the more you start to beware of the local cultures and specialities that you have, but maybe almost forgot. I think you can create many new possibilities for cooperation and new business when you start to think outside the box. I give you another example from my home region.

The archipelago back home is full of stones. It's not easy to take a boat and go fishing, but local people are used to rocks and shallows. In the year of 2006 our archipelago became a site on the UNESCO world heritage list, after a long process, the first nature site in Finland. All other six sites in Finland are culture heritage.

The first five years went very slowly when we were thinking of creating new businesses and looking for new possibilities. We had to start to inform the people who were living in our region, why on earth we became important universally. The answer is that in our region you can still see the land-up lift today, since the last ice age for more than 10 000 years ago. At that time a thick ice covered the Nordic countries and also a northern part of Ireland, Great Britain, Germany and the Baltic states. In my region, the Kvarken region, the narrowest part between Finland and Sweden in the Gulf of Bothnia, the ice was as the thickest, 3 km thick. This thick ice pressed the earth down and still we are rising up from the sea. On the Swedish side there is the world highest coastal line and on the Finnish side the lowest, because we are still coming up from the sea. We get new land every year. Today we have a common world heritage site between Sweden and Finland and the name is High Coast- Kvarken Archipelago. This make us together also unique. In the whole world there are 962 world heritage sites at the moment, only 28 are cross-borders and we are one of them. What I want so say with this example is that something that local people on both side of the maritime border did not almost know nothing about some years ago, turned out to be a future cooperation investment. Now we have cross-border projects and we try to develop common new tourism and culture products and businesses. So to think together outside the box can really be future cross-border investment.

I have been involved in AEBR for more than 10 years and our meetings have given me possibilities over the years to learn more about European border regions and also visit them. Of course we still have many obstacles in cross-border cooperation to coop with. We have problems in legislative matters, in taxation, in daily problems crossing the borders for work and business, with EU-regulations and other administrative matters.

But I think cross-border cooperation has more opportunities than obstacles, but it depends on us. Do we want to see the possibilities or not? Do we want to think outside the box or not? Do we want to look for new branches or not? Can we coop with different culture backgrounds or not? Do we have a positive attitude to each other on both side of the border or not? If you have answered the questions with a yes you are already more than half way on the future cross-border cooperation road.

From the things I have seen, learnt and heard about your region, I know you will manage to create new future cross-border elements and implement them in your region. I wish you all the best and good luck in the East-border region. The future is yours, together.

Thank you!