

Stewart Dickson MLA - speech at the General Assembly and Annual Conference of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) - LIEGE, 7- 9 NOVEMBER 2013

Presidents, Delegates, Ladies and gentlemen,

I was very pleased of the invitation to attend the General Assembly of the Association of European Border Regions and its Annual Conference. The long-standing cooperation between the AEBR and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is a solid background on which we continue to build.

I am rapporteur for the "Interregional cooperation" report, which is under preparation within Governance Committee of the Congress. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ, who chairs the Congress Governance Committee, and who is a tireless defender of cross-border cooperation.

May I say that the Congress has always been very active on cross-border cooperation initiatives and I have to acknowledge that there has been a positive trend on this field during the recent years: we are moving from informal exchanges to practical projects, based on light

structures which could be considered as 'cooperation platforms' rather than administrative units.

There is a new spirit of pragmatism, where actors are actively searching for practical solutions to common local problems which arise from the increasing mobility of our citizens.

There is also an important change of perception: national boundaries are regarded more and more as reservoirs of untapped potential, rather than as obstacles to cooperation.

The financial crisis is also focusing attention on the potential benefits of cross-border cooperation. Local and regional authorities are trying to avoid duplication with expensive infrastructure projects and pool their resources in areas such as health, education and emergency services.

But the picture is only positive. The practical implementation of projects implies tackling a number of significant challenges:

on cross-border cooperation initiatives we have to ensure that projects are sustainable, we have to assess the added value of a project, we have to find the right level of administration and legal structure that can carry the project on, we have to create a

productive working environment with partners from very different institutional and administrative cultures, and we have to set up an effective knowledge base for the cross-border trans-frontier territories.

The differences in legal systems and administrative culture and practices are compounded by a fragmentation of our knowledge about how projects work, who is doing what, which projects are successful and why.

What we could do is to conceive a programme of capacity-building and training. We need to consolidate and pool existing expertise and develop indicators that will measure the impact of cross-border cooperation activities. We need to bring together the main actors working on cross-border cooperation, with a view to establishing a pool of expertise, coordinate research and develop capacity-building programmes. We do not necessarily have the capacity to undertake the ambitious work that is necessary.

There are several specialised actors and associations working in this field - and the Association of European Border Regions is one of them . What we should do is to bring these different networks together, to

better coordinate our work and to provide a political impetus to our initiatives.

We still have to change the way in which cross-border cooperation is perceived at national level and try to multiply cross-border cooperation projects.

Last but not least I am pleased to inform you that this year Protocol n°3 to the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities entered into force. The Protocol provides a much-needed legal framework for setting up Euro-regional cooperation groupings. It is up to us to make use of this new instrument and to make sure that as many of our territories as possible are able to benefit from it. Since 10 July 2013 we can also build on an additional instrument: the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe approved an Appendix to Protocol No. 3 to the Convention that contains detailed options for facilitating the implementation of euro-regional groupings. The countries wishing to develop interregional cooperation may also take inspiration from this new text.

We have the instruments, we now have to foster the political will.

I will not fail to report back to the Congress on the interesting case studies and experiences that I have heard during this annual conference and I thank you for your attention. I am will be delighted to answer questions now and also informally with conference members.