

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, twinning has a long and mostly successful history. It has developed after the Second World War, in parallel to the progress made by the European integration process. One of the major developments was the establishment of new town twinning links between EU Member States and countries from Central or Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, anticipating and preparing their integration in the European Union.

Town twinning is a reality in today's Europe. An important number of municipalities are linked to each other through a formal town twinning agreement. Such partnership aims at encouraging cooperation between the towns and mutual understanding between their citizens.

The project CITIES, you all were participating in during one year time, aimed at promoting town-twinning, focusing in particular on the multilateral decentralized cooperation approach, as a vehicle to foster European Integration and to promote, develop and strengthen twinning agreements relations amongst local authorities in the enlarged Europe.

As the last project's activity this conference aimed at:

- sharing know-how on town twinning methodology in general, but also the experiences gained from the project
- giving thematic inputs for new approaches to twinning
- creating a platform for communication between different actors of twinning initiatives
- creating synergies and an increased number of follow-up projects on thematic twinning

As we have heard from the workshops reporters, these results have been achieved. We had a quite interesting debate on how town-twinning helped in building better Europe for its all citizens, no matter where they live. Whatever workshop you may have chosen, I hope that this conference has widened your town twinning horizon.

No matter what is the reason for twinning (social, economic, political or cultural), they cover a broad range of exchanges, projects and initiatives, from which benefit all levels of community including business, education, culture, social, sports, youth and women. Exchange programs between twin-towns allow youth to learn new languages and to experience different cultures and heritages, promoting inter-cultural relations and understanding.

We see a great chance in using high information technologies which has indeed draw people closer together. The issues such as global warming, climatic changes, air pollution, famine and war may only be resolved through international initiatives and mutual understanding. In this context town-twinning can be perceived as a positive step towards fostering long-term collaboration and cooperation amongst people in different countries to improve the quality of their life and overcome some common problems.

The success of town-twinning is not purely coincidental but it should be developed through the sharing of a common vision and a willingness to engage in a meaningful partnership.

Today still we must strive to keep it up to date, and adapt its themes and methodology to our time, so as to let it stay a vivid tool of integration and development.

Like other cooperation, twinning has its specific strengths and weaknesses.

As weaknesses, we identified the following:

- Limited funding, language barriers, insufficient human resources and activity coordination in partner towns, the partner search for EU projects (and the complexity of application documents) and marketing issues.

These are problems that need to be addressed, and some of them have been addressed today – mainly how to find a partner, how to apply for funding, etc.

But while we should not forget to improve these weak points, let us rather concentrate on the strengths of town twinning - they are considerable:

- The most important strength probably is that twin cities inspire each other for the improvement of life quality in their own city – be it in the social, economic educational, cultural, sport or ecological field. We should not forget energy issues, use of renewable energy sources and improving energy efficiency. As we have seen today, there are a large number of possible cooperation themes. Exchange of specific know-how on any local subject can bring huge benefits to either community, especially if non-governmental actors like universities and civil society organisations are involved.
- The second strengths - partnerships can increase the political weight of cities in international organisations;
- Also, twinning activities help the people to understand different cultures, to learn that others exists too, so such kind of collaboration increasing their tolerance and maybe even leading to personal international friendships. Exchanges between high schools, universities and other institutions remain an important dimension of partnerships and make them popular among citizens.

With this conference, I believe you have been motivated to give new life to existing partnerships or even start a new twinning project – maybe you have even been able to find an interesting partner.

Those who would like to continue the discussions are invited to join the common dinner.

I would like to thank you very much for your active participation and for your contribution at this conference. Let us continue the cooperation to keep town twinning an effective tool.

Chairman

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