

Discurs a càrrec Excma Sra D^o Mariann Fischer Boel *Member of the European Commission responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development*, realitzat el dia 5 de maig del 2005 a les Jornades de Clausura del Congrés del Món Rural de Catalunya.

I am honoured to have been invited to speak at this Congress.

It's always nice when a country not only cultivates a positive national image but also lives up to it. That has certainly been the case on this, my first official visit to Spain as a European Union Commissioner: the typically warm Mediterranean welcome which I have received could well persuade me to come back sooner rather than later (if I'm invited!).

I have been looking forward to seeing the outcome of this Congress, which is a good example of building rural development policy on a foundation of careful reflection and broad consultation. In terms of the relationship between town and countryside, Spain – and within it, Catalonia – present an interesting picture to the outside world.

Not so many years ago, I suspect that many people saw Spain as a mainly rural society. Of course, many of your great cities have been around for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, if we leave aside your famous beaches, dominant images of Spain around the world were probably filled with olive groves, vineyards and mountains.

How quickly things change. Between 1990 and 2000, Spain's population grew by 5%, but urban areas expanded by 25%. Development in Catalonia has mirrored this. The last 15 years have been an era in which Spanish cities – including the magnificent Barcelona - have taken an enviable share of the explosion of city tourism. The global image of Spain, and of Catalonia, has been transformed.

The shift to a higher level of urbanisation has been accompanied by clear economic progress. Over the last few years, growth has generally been strong; unemployment has been rolled back; inflation is under control.

However, we must take care about the conclusions which we draw from all this. I think it would be wrong to conclude that, in any part of the EU, we can do everything that needs to be done for our societies, our economies and our environment by always looking to urban life for inspiration and

dynamism while leaving the countryside to its own devices. In Catalonia, in Spain, in the EU as a whole, we need our rural areas, and we need to keep them in good health.

We need them because they provide goods and services which towns and cities cannot. We need them because they act as our lungs. We need them because urban life is not for everyone. We need them because it is deeply unhealthy to lose contact with nature.

The rural spaces of the EU are therefore essential to our very lives; but they are not in the condition which we would like.

The average income of people in the EU-25's rural areas is only about two-thirds of the level in towns and cities. Fewer women find employment. The service sector is less developed, levels of higher education are lower, and fewer households have broadband access to the internet. There is an urgent need to increase competitiveness and create jobs in rural areas.

In some parts of the EU, farming faces a huge battle to adjust to the pressures of more open markets, and to find the necessary capital to invest in new technologies.

Then there are environmental issues. We have made some progress over the last few years with the protection of biodiversity, but more needs to be done. Also, levels of excess nitrogen in water have hardly changed in the EU-15 since 1990. The availability and use of water are, of course, issues of particular concern in Spain – with regard not only to agriculture but also to the preservation of areas of natural beauty.

In view of all these challenges, it is clear that the EU still needs an active, effective rural policy. Public money can play a valid role in “priming the pump” – in providing the initial opportunities which then create a virtuous circle of employment, investment and attractive living conditions. Public money is also an appropriate way of paying for the public goods provided by the countryside: the clean air and water, the beautiful landscapes, the pleasant forests and open spaces which we say we want.

Rural development policy is an EU policy and is thus subject to a measure of central control, but it also leaves a great deal of flexibility to individual Member States and regions. It spreads power. To work well, it must be handled effectively at every level.

At the central level, we now have in place – or will soon have – all the tools we need to make the policy effective in the coming financial period of 2007 to 2013.

One of these tools is an updated EU Regulation. The new text both adjusts existing measures available to Member States, and adds new ones. In particular, we have tried to introduce more measures to increase competitiveness and create jobs.

An area of special emphasis is innovation. I am convinced that the only way the rural areas of Europe can become more competitive in the future is by focusing on quality rather than bulk production. Innovation is one means of achieving this.

We also intend that the new rules should help to achieve a better balance in our rural policy between different sorts of goals.

EU policy on the countryside has traditionally focused on farming, and for good reason. But although farming is still at the heart of most of our rural communities, its position has shifted somewhat. We must continue to support farmers in their efforts to modernise, to invest, to train.

Rural development money paid to farmers can bring benefits beyond the farming sector. Nevertheless, it is also helpful to channel funding directly to other elements in the rural economy and rural society if we want our money to have the maximum impact on competitiveness and jobs.

This is why the EU has decided to categorise rural development measures according to three “thematic axes”, which are:

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

As you know, each Member State will have to spend a minimum proportion of its overall rural funding on each of these thematic axes. The agreed proportions are 10% for axes 1 and 3, and 25% for axis 2. They must also spend at least 5% of their rural budget on projects involving the Leader initiative.

Another means of achieving balance in rural policy will be the use of Community strategic guidelines and national strategy plans.

They should make it easier for Member States to link their rural programmes to the EU's goals for environmentally sustainable economic development under the Lisbon and Göteborg agendas. The EU's approach to the Lisbon strategy has been criticised for being long on talk and short on action so far. Rural policy can make a big contribution to moving forward the Lisbon objectives of growth and jobs for Europe – with a certain level of co-ordination and planning.

All in all, then, I think we have the right policy for the years ahead. But I know that a further question arises, especially in Spain and Catalonia: We may have a top-of-the-range policy – a Ferrari of a policy - but can we afford to run it? Is the money there?

My answer is: Yes, but we will have to run it more economically than we would like.

The Council and the European Parliament have decided that EU funding for rural development from 2007 to 2013 will total just under €70 billion.

This is, of course, well below the €89 billion proposed by the Commission. Moreover, this lowering of our ambitions will have a particular impact on Member States of the EU-15, because it is essential that we give a fair share of funding to the New Member States, which have a lot of work to do in restructuring their rural economies.

I acknowledge the difficulties which this will cause for Spain and Catalonia. However, this is the situation we are in.

I do believe that much can still be achieved with the money available – especially when the extra sums supplied by modulation and co-financing are taken into account. Our duty is to take that money and use every euro to maximum effect.

It is certainly not for me to tell you exactly what to do with your funding: as I have said, rural development policy hands as much power as possible down to the national, regional and local levels. That is why initiatives like this Congress are so valuable.

I have particularly noted that your Congress has been organised around 5 themes which correspond widely to European Strategic Guidelines.

On the basis of your particular situations in Catalonia and the rest of Spain, and according to what I understand to be your concerns, perhaps I could mention a few elements which I would hope to see in your rural development plans and programmes for 2007 to 2013?

First, I would hope to see ongoing attempts to strike a balance between the needs of profitable farming and those of environmental care. Farmers need to make money; but against this need we must weigh the value of areas of fragile natural beauty, especially those covered by the Natura 2000 network. Finding the right compromise is a difficult but essential task.

Secondly, I would hope to see continued support for the wider use of technology, especially information and communication technology. Towns and cities do not have a monopoly on the use of such things. ICT can unlock huge benefits for farms, other rural businesses, and individuals.

Thirdly, I would hope to see ongoing support for investment in the modernisation of farms and agri-industry, and the kinds of innovation which will provide citizens with high-quality food. This is surely the way forward. Europe is not competitive when it comes to bulk production, but we do have some of the best quality products in the world. And we can be even better. Measures to support this should also give a significant boost to rural employment.

Fourthly, I would hope to see the Leader approach to rural development keep its popularity and momentum when it is integrated into the mainstream of policy in 2007. Spain and Catalonia have a strong record in using the Leader method to involve people in local projects from which they can see concrete local benefit. Keep up the good work!

Finally, I must mention one subject close to my own heart, namely bio-fuels. As the European Spring Summit has shown, this is an important priority for the future. EU Heads of State and Government agreed that 8 % of our transport fuel should come from bio-fuels in 2015. Rural Development funding can be used for some of the necessary investments to fulfil this objective.

These are some of my modest hopes. As you can see, they all relate to issues which are regularly discussed in Spain at national level and at your level. And it's important to realise that they can all be addressed through our new Rural Development Regulation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I look forward with great interest to hearing the conclusions of this Congress, and to seeing what emerges from the planning process elsewhere in Spain.

There is no doubt that Catalonia and Spain have a number of challenges to face up to in their rural areas – just like the rest of the EU. But you also have many strengths.

In the years ahead, I fully expect that your great cities will continue to do well, creating and seizing opportunities. There is no reason why there should not be an equal sense of optimism and dynamism in your rural areas. Your society has deep rural roots. When roots stay strong, the plant stays healthy.

Look after your roots! Thank you for your attention