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**Improving the Quality of Structural Funds Programming
through Exchange of Experience**

IQ-NET CONFERENCE

**New Partnership Dynamics in a Changing Cohesion Policy Context
Åre, SWEDEN
2-4 December 2009**

The 27th IQ-Net meeting took place in Åre, in the region of Mid-North Sweden on 2-4 December 2009. It was hosted by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, which during the 2007-2013 programming period acts as the Managing Authority for the Regional Competitiveness and Employment Programmes of the Mid-North Sweden region as well as for the cross-border programme Öresund-Kattegat-Skaggearak.

The conference focused on changes in the approach to partnership in the 2007-2013 programming period, placing particular emphasis on the challenges and opportunities emerging from the new thematic and geographic scope of programmes.

The plenary session opened with the EPRC review of the progress in the implementation of the 2007-2013 programmes, taking into account the recent developments, notably the recent measures undertaken to respond to the economic crisis and the preparation of the Strategic Reports. Whilst many programmes are starting to implement the Structural Funds on a significant scale, others are still facing difficulties with achieving the set targets. Despite this, the impact of the economic crisis on programmes has so far been limited, with public sector bodies being in most cases successful in maintaining investments. Financial absorption has significantly improved in the past six months and monitoring systems are fully operational and working to a satisfactory degree in most programmes.

The main topic of the conference was further elaborated with the EPRC presentation on the role and contribution of partnerships in the Cohesion Policy context. The aim of the presentation was to investigate how the partnership principle is being implemented across the EU, with a specific focus on the role of non-governmental partners. It revolved around several key questions: how is the regulatory obligation of partnerships interpreted in different countries and regions, with reference to the involvement of socio-economic partners and other non-governmental bodies; what factors explain the degree to which they are involved; what are the constraints and facilitators determining their involvement; what is the evidence for their influence on programme design and delivery; what are the lessons of current experience for the debate on the future of Cohesion Policy. Mr Jan Olsson, member of the European Economic & Social Committee, contributed to the discussion by providing the perspective of socio-economic and third sector partners on the matter.

The discussion continued during the interactive workshop session, conducted according to the format of the "World Café" technique, with delegates divided into groups and a group facilitator managing each group's discussion. Organised around 2 discussion segments, this session provided partners the opportunity to exchange opinions, views and experiences in small working groups.

Before the closure of the conference, a synthesis of the key messages emerged from the World Café was made, followed by a discussion of future IQ-Net Network priorities.

The 3-day conference agenda included the visit of a project in the area, which has benefited from European Funding. Delegates had the opportunity to inspect the Östersund Ski Arena and Stadium, a major sports facility of the region. In a region that relies heavily on natural resources and tourism, the investment aims at strengthening Östersund and its surroundings as a venue for world class competitive events in winter sports.

The Greek delegate attending the 27th IQ-Net meeting was Mr Dex Agourides, Director General of MOU. Mr Agourides was invited to act as table host during the workshop – group discussion session.

