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Overview of the outcome of the Finnish WGEC chair in 2005-2007

Finland held the chairmanship in the WGEC for the period November 2005-2007. The theme for Finland's chairmanship in the WGEC was "Improving business opportunities". Especially co-financing over the Barents borders has been surveyed.

The most visible part of the Finnish chairmanship programme was the continued development of the Barents Industrial Partnership (BIP) meetings for enhanced interaction between enterprises, authorities, economic operators and other stakeholders. The two BIP events arranged during Finland's chairmanship (March 2006 in Rovaniemi and in April 2007 in Saariselkä), gathered together some 260 participants from all over the Barents area. This clearly shows the need for the BIP events as well as the great interest towards Barents region and its possibilities.

The WGEC and the Barents Business Advisory Group (BBAG) arranged the 5th BIP meeting in Rovaniemi on 28-29 March 2006 under the theme "New openings: Infrastructure investments and subcontracting in the Barents region". The two day event gathered together some 130 professionals representing private sector, local and central authority and academia to discuss and contribute to the positive development of the Barents region. The 5th BIP meeting was divided into three sub-sessions: "Infrastructure investments in the Murmansk region", "Transport in the Barents region" and "Subcontracting in the Barents region". Among the speakers were representatives of Murmansk regional government, various experts on transport and logistics and entrepreneurs operating in the Barents region.

The 6th BIP meeting, second during the Finnish chairmanship, was held in Saariselkä on 18-19 April 2007. The title of the 6th BIP was "Experiences in international co-financing - focussing on the needs of SMEs in the Barents region". Again, more than 130 people showed interest towards economic issues of the Barents area. The Saariselkä meeting was opened by the Under-Secretary of State Pekka Huhtaniemi from the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In his speech Mr. Huhtaniemi mentioned the key role of enterprises themselves in taking necessary steps towards successful economic actions.

Governments can improve the market conditions on their own behalf but it is the companies themselves that make the final decisions according to their resources and abilities. Among the speakers of the 6th BIP were representatives of international finance institutions, export promotion organisations, chambers of commerce and private companies operating in the Barents region, to mention a few.

During their existence, the BIP meetings have evolved from seminars involving only authorities and large corporations to a more practical type of events that gather various actors representing business life, public sector and members of the academia. This transformation has been very explicit during the recent chairmanship period of Finland. BIP meetings also act as places for networking between the participants and exchange practical information. The two BIP meetings arranged during the Finnish chairmanship period clearly show that the concept is useful and an important supplement to the economic cooperation in the Barents region. The two last BIP events have analyzed the challenges and interests of SMEs located in the area. The number of people that participated the two BIP events indicate that a need for dialogue involving the SMEs does exist. The BIP concept should be further developed in the future.

The popularity of the newly established web-pages also indicate the need of such service. We hope that the WGEC will further enhance the use of Internet in its work in the future.

Renewed international interest in the Barents region is adding potential to increased regional economic cooperation and the WGEC has welcomed the re-activation of the Regional Working Group on Investments and Economic Cooperation with satisfaction.

Another issue high on Finland's chairmanship agenda was business development and entrepreneurship. To serve this end the promotion and dissemination of economic information was focussed on during Finland's chairmanship period. The WGEC established a new web-site in autumn 2006 to promote basic and easily accessible up-to-date economic information including the economic profiles of the Barents regions. The main purpose of the new site is to give information especially to small and medium sized enterprises in the Barents region in order to promote cross-border business. The site contains, i.a., economic profiles of the Barents regions that includes basic economic data of the regions. Some 5000-7000 people visit the pages monthly and the feedback of the content of the pages has been very positive.

Contributions to the Northern Dimension (ND) has been on the agenda of the WGEC during the Finnish Chairmanship. At the September 2007 meeting the representative of the European Commission suggested that their representative could attend regularly to WGEC meetings to inform about the

proceedings of the ND and invited the BEAC-WGEC to contribute to the further development of the ND policy.

The WGEC has acted in close cooperation with other BEAC working groups, notably the Barents Business Advisory Group (BBAG) and the Working Group on Trade Barriers (WGTB), as well as the BEATA (Barents Euro-arctic Transport Area). Close exchange of information on activities has also been pursued with the CBSS/WGEC.

Mr. Timo Karjalainen will report on the work of the Barents Forest-Sector Task Force (BFSTF) later in the meeting.

To conclude, the global economic importance of the Barents region both on a regional and on international level is growing. The rich natural resources, notably oil and gas but forests and minerals as well, ensure the continuous interest towards the regions of Northern Europe. During its chairmanship period of the WGEC, Finland has aimed to further deepen the cooperation among stakeholders in the Barents area.