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de contribución a la evaluación  
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2007-2012”**

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**MR. ARNOLDAS ABRAMAVICIUS**

**“European conference  
for the mid-term review  
of the community strategy  
2007-2012  
on health and safety  
at work”**

Barcelona, Thursday 3rd and Friday 4th June 2010

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**European Conference for the mid-term review of the Community Strategy 2007-2012 on health and Safety at Work**

3-4 June 2010 – Barcelona (ES)

**Speech by ARNOLDAS ABRAMAVICIUS (LT/EEP)**

Chair of the Economic and Social Policy (ECOS) commission of the CoR

***"Expectations of local and regional authorities for the Community Strategy on Safety and health at Work"***

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be present among you today and represent the Committee of the Regions. I would like to thank the Spanish Presidency most warmly for its invitation and for its continued interest in our work.

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) has issued opinions both on the Community Strategy on Health and Strategy at Work **2002-2006** (opinion adopted in July 2002) and on the Community Strategy on Health and Strategy at Work **2007-2013** (opinion adopted in November 2007), for which the rapporteur on behalf of the Economic and Social Policy (ECOS) commission was appointed U.Silberg.

In its first opinion from 2002, the CoR had expressed concern (point 9) "*at the absence in the communication of any specific reference to local and regional authorities, which it considers to have a pivotal role in developing and implementing the strategy, particularly in regard to SMEs, by virtue of their function (...) in monitoring, developing and enforcing the provisions of the Communication, and because they are very significant employers in their own right*". Regrettably, the last Community Strategy (period 2007-2013) did not make more references to local and regional authorities and limited itself to simply mentioning the "experience" gained at local/regional level and the need to "disseminate" best practices, which led me as rapporteur to repeat the same concern. I am therefore pleased that the Spanish presidency invited the Committee of the Regions to this European conference and in particular to this session to share the perspective of local and regional authorities on this issue of health and safety at work. As we are approaching the middle of the term of the strategy, it is indeed high time to review where we stand on progress made, as it is not yet too late to adjust political efforts.

#### Relevance for local and regional authorities

The Commission Communication from 2007 stated the importance for the sake of effectiveness of strengthening coherence across several policy areas, and mentioned notably: public health; regional development and social cohesion; public procurement; and employment and restructuring. Many, if not all, of these are key issues for regional

and local authorities! They thus clearly have a role to play here in ensuring that synergies are created or enhanced between these policy areas.

As a matter of fact, Europe's local and regional authorities together account for 16% of total EU GDP; 1/3 of total public expenditure; and 2/3 of total public investment. This illustrates that any institutional approach that fails to coordinate all tiers of governance is bound to fail. We have to give up the pyramidal hierarchical approach in the European Union which places Europe above the Member States, the Member States above the regions, the regions above the cities and the local communities. Instead, we need a new partnership between these entities to bring the EU closer to the citizens. Regional and local politicians are also European politicians! Today, all levels of government are essentially interlocked. Indeed, when implementing a strategy commonly agreed upon, be it the EU2020 or the Health and Safety at Work strategies, all actors – public and private – should take the proper responsibility assigned to them.

Beyond this aspect and very concretely, regional and local authorities are significantly large employers in all EU member states and are thus well-placed to spearhead health and safety initiatives, or share best practices. Together, Europe's 300 regions (of which 74 with legislative powers) and 92.500 local authorities indeed employ a total of 18 million people, which represents 56% of total public sector employment. They can therefore play a key role in educating their staff in health and safety at work, for example by having regular brief presentations on health and safety issues and by appointing Health and Safety Officers from amongst their staff.

Local and regional authorities can also change workers' and employers' perceptions of risks. They have indeed the means to hold awareness-raising campaigns and disseminate information at the local level about the challenges arising and ways to tackle them, getting the community involved in such actions. Increased understanding of the role of health and safety at work and a commitment on the part of workers and employers can in return contribute to better job satisfaction and well-being at work. If properly targeted, it could also have benefits for the social inclusion of groups such as disabled people, women, migrant workers, elder workers or younger workers, which are particularly overexposed to occupational risks. The aspect of demographic change should particularly be looked at: the Committee of the Regions adopted last week an opinion on this matter, stressing the importance of an active and healthy ageing and proposing in this respect an integrated lifelong approach.

In the end, the issue of health and safety at work is of direct and concrete relevance for citizens and SMEs alike. The latter are the main employers and source of economic growth at local level, and the former are our electors. You will therefore understand the paramount importance for local and regional authorities of such an issue.

## **Importance of health and safety at work for Europe's competitiveness**

I have just mentioned small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Let me comment further on this, because we touch here another important issue: the importance of health and safety at work for Europe's competitiveness.

As you perfectly know, the renewed Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs (2005) as well as the new EU2020 strategy attach great importance to SMEs due to their major role in terms of employment in Europe. Efforts to improve health and safety at work are in this respect to be welcomed given the economic costs associated to it; however the burden this may place on SMEs must equally be recognised.

The CoR shares the Commission's view that, under the Lisbon strategy and thanks to the Community strategy 2002-2006, EU Member States have acknowledged the major contribution that guaranteeing quality and productivity at work can play in promoting economic growth and employment, and that progresses have been made. It is now acknowledged that the enormous economic costs of problems associated with health and safety at work inhibits economic growth and affects the competitiveness of businesses in the EU. The lack of effective protection to ensure health and safety at work can indeed result in absenteeism, in the wake of workplace accidents and occupational illnesses, and result in permanent occupational disability, which has a major negative impact on the economy in addition to being a human tragedy for the people concerned.

There needs however to be a balance between the health and safety of workers and the temptation to over-legislate, be over-prescriptive, and override the principle of subsidiarity through a "one size fits all" piece of legislation. Health and safety of workers from exposure to sunlight is just one example of area where one needs to take into account local and regional specificities. Instead, any Community strategy should take into account the variety of stakeholders involved, develop appropriate monitoring frameworks and steer the establishment of incentives for SMEs to develop effective prevention measures.

As an example, regional and local authorities could adhere to strict public procurement procedures and introduce health and safety requirements into their procedures when buying in or outsourcing services or awarding public contracts.

Under the scope of the regional competitiveness objective for 2007-2013, any SME that wishes to grow and create jobs can also be assisted through cohesion policy: this tool could also be used in assisting SMEs to comply with existing legislation. Other programmes such as PROGRESS may also be of use. The dissemination of good practice at the local level is essential in this area, and local and regional authorities could play a role in facilitating this.

## Mid-term review of the Strategy: CoR expectations

As mentioned in the invitation letter that we have all received, this European conference is organised in response to a request from the European Parliament to carry out a mid-term Strategy review. Such a mid-term review is obviously equally welcome by the Committee of the Regions, and as a matter of fact the CoR opinion adopted in 2007 for which I was the rapporteur made the same request (point 16): "*The CoR (...) feels that the document should indicate how often – and how thoroughly – the plans are to be revised (plans left unrevised for, say, three years risk becoming obsolete)*";". We are about three years after, so this is just the moment to review the initial plans indeed.

One of the main points raised in the opinion, in 2007, was the criticism that the proposed Community strategy had obviously a timeframe (2007-2012) and an overall objective (securing a 25% reduction in work accidents at work by 2012 in the EU-27), with eight proposed "instruments" to achieve it<sup>1</sup>, but at the same time it lacked a structured vision, with clear intermediary targets/objectives (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and timed, SMART) and subsequent robust indicators. Naturally, this recommendation comes under a special light at a moment where we talk about conducting a mid-term review of the Community strategy.

As mentioned earlier, I also regretted the lack of attention paid to local and regional authorities and stressed the need to coordinate the different levels of governance. For an effective implementation of such an ambitious strategy, it is indeed essential to indicate how cooperation, work-distribution and feedback processes involving the various stakeholders are organised. From this perspective, I am nevertheless pleased, as mentioned earlier, that the Spanish presidency invited the Committee of the Regions to take part in this European conference. I would just like to invite all Member States present to similarly involve their local and regional authorities in the design of their national strategies. This is essential if you want the Community strategy to have teeth on the ground - the only level that in the end matters.

I was also surprised at the Community strategy's failure to bring quality management into the discussion of health and safety at work, or indeed to take up the issue at all. Many businesses in the EU Member States, including leading European enterprises, have indeed introduced the EFQM system (European Foundation for Quality Management) as a basis for their activities, and all Member States should be made aware of this system as a model for an effective strategy that may also be used in the field of health and safety at work. Let me remind you the fundamental concepts underlying the EFQM system: results orientation, customer (end user) focus, leadership and constancy of purpose,

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<sup>1</sup> For memo: 1- guarantee the proper implementation of EU legislation, 2- support SMEs in the implementation of the legislation in force, 3- adapt the legal framework to changes in the workplace and simplify it (particularly in view of SMEs), 4- promote the development and implementation of national strategies, 5- encourage changes in the behaviour of workers and encourage their employers to adopt health-focused approaches, 6- finalise the methods for identifying and evaluating new potential risks, 7- improve the tracking of progress, and 8- promote health and safety and international level.

management by processes and facts, people development and involvement, partnership development and corporate social responsibility. Once again, the absence of such a framework is problematic in the context of the mid-term review of a strategy that precisely aims at improving *quality* and productivity at work.

Another point on which I insisted was the weakness in the appraisal of the current situation. We called in particular for a distinction to be made between the technological, psychological, sociological, cultural and economic aspects of the risks involved when making the assessment of damage, as well as for a continual monitoring of conditions and risk factors. Naturally, for this to happen, the European Commission and EU Member States should, as a matter of urgency, have access to a reliable data collection and processing system that provides a true statistical overview of the extent of occupational accidents and diseases. In this sense, we have recommended to start harmonizing statistics of labour accidents and professional illnesses in the European Union. I would be curious to know if there has been any progress in this area since 2007.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to recall that naturally every human life that is lost and every working day lost through sickness represent a considerable loss for every Member State, regional or local authority, business and small- and medium-sized enterprise, but that the overall costs to society are, however, very much higher. And it should precisely be the purpose of the Community Strategy to look at this broader picture and to put in place the correct incentives for all stakeholders to reach the social optimum.

The role of local and regional authorities in implementing, promoting, monitoring and enforcing health and safety at work should with this regard be recognised and supported, particularly in relation to SMEs, in view of their increasing economic importance and need for assistance.

Thank you for your attention.