

Mr Joseph Borg

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As president of Insuleur (Network of the Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the European Union) I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the 3rd Transnational Networking Workshop of the INNOVAGRO project. As I told you this morning it is my pleasure to welcome you at Insuleur's Head Quarters here in the island of Chios.

We are gathered here to discuss the options to establish a Permanent Network of interested parties, which is ultimately the scope of this project i.e. the development of an innovative network for the promotion of extroversion of agro-food companies in the Adriatic-Ionian area.

The project focuses on the development of links and synergies between farmers, agro-food enterprises, research Institutes and public authorities, for the:

- the promotion of agro-food products' extroversion;
- the development of agro-food companies' internationalization; and
- the promotion of environmentally – friendly farming practices.

Indeed the project introduces an element of innovation through the services of marketing and management in a sector which is generally considered as traditional and quite fragmented. Moreover it tries to bridge the gap between scientific research and practice. We all know that the present challenges in the agri-business sector are significant such as the decline of the rural population, the emigration of young people from villages to towns, the closure of infrastructure (or the lack of it), and the small size of farms.

Projects such as these help us to learn from each other, enhance communication between the different sectors, which in turn will ensure that this sector will continue to thrive. Events like today bring us together in a spirit of collaboration to learn from each other and encourage each other to adopt solutions which will ultimately safeguard this very important sector.

Indeed, when we see the project's main outputs, these are very ambitious i.e.:

- a. The establishment of a Transnational Cooperation Network in agro-food & tourism sector; and
- b. The development of a Virtual Transnational Business Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center (VIBIEC), offering support through e-incubators, e-business network platform, and other self-assessment tools.

However, it is only when we dream and are ambitious that we can really achieve goals which up to a few years ago would have seemed impossible. We hope that this project will provide the right tools to help SMEs to innovate and access international markets by:

- Improving SMEs' productivity, competitiveness and access to international markets leading to a growth in SMEs turnover;
- Reduce transactional costs;
- Create new trade contacts and relationships;
- Increase the percentage of SMEs involved in internationalization and innovation processes;
- Strengthen research, innovation and technological developments;
- Set up the basis for new strategies/policies/ from local/regional authorities, to support SMEs innovation in the agro-food sector;
- Involve policy makers and stakeholders with increased awareness and enhancing their relevant knowledge, competencies and skills; and
- Enforcing the link between agro-food production and tourism.

The project is already seeing some important results such as the compilation of guidelines of best practices. This augurs well for the continuation of the project.

With this in mind, on behalf of INSULEUR I wish you all a fruitful and enjoyable networking workshop.

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