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Building cities for the 21st century: EU - China dialogue

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Let me start by congratulating all those who have worked so hard to bring about this impressive Forum – in particular our Chinese hosts and my good friend and colleague Commissioner Oettinger.

My own Directorate General has been cooperating on regional policy including urban issues with China since 2006: and we know how valuable this partnership is. The EU China 2020 strategic plan for cooperation commits us today to continue our dialogue on regional and urban issues, in the interests of growth, competitiveness, and innovation.

In 2010 we launched the CETREGIO project which offers Chinese experts the opportunity to strengthen links with European regions and cities, and to exchange experience with them. In the coming year, for example, under the twinning activities we organise with the NDRC, participants in the exchange programme will focus on sustainable and low carbon urban development.

Hundreds of Chinese and European policy makers have already benefitted from such activities, and I am glad to see this relationship now opening up to many more participants on both sides.

A year ago the Directorate General for which I am responsible was renamed "Regional and URBAN Policy" – a change which reflects the increasing attention we are paying to this issue in Europe. Around two thirds of the directorates of the Commission work in some way on policy that has impacts on cities – in fields as diverse as social inclusion, energy efficiency, sustainable mobility, climate and research. My job is therefore to ensure that all these initiatives support each other and go in the same direction towards a common vision.

And, in my own portfolio, nearly half of EU €325 billion structural funds are spent in European urban areas in one way or another.

China's urban population is growing at a breathtaking speed. But in Europe already nearly three quarters of our population lives in cities. The quality of life of our citizens, our prospects for future prosperity, and our response to global issues like climate change will all be determined in cities. Our greatest challenges are concentrated there – and our capacity to find innovative solutions is also strongest in our cities.

So, designing our cities for sustainable growth is one of the major challenges of this century.

Together the EU and China account for a quarter of the world's population (1.85 billion people). This places a certain obligation on us to work together to find the best way forward for our increasingly urban societies.

In Europe we believe no city problem can be tackled in isolation: the social, economic and environmental challenges we face must be addressed together in an integrated way. Overlapping problems need joined up solutions.

I will give you just one example: In Atlanta, one of the largest cities in the United States, the city authorities reduced vehicle traffic by around 20% during the 1996 Olympics. The result was an astonishing 40% reduction in asthma-related emergencies. The rewards for smart planning are a healthier population, and more economic dynamism.

The EU and China share an interest in finding those integrated solutions. We share an interest in reinforcing dialogue on sustainable urban development because both the EU and China want to spread the benefits of economic progress. And though our cities are very diverse, European and Chinese urban areas are developing expertise and solutions that make them models for others, in smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Starting from different contexts and challenges, European and Chinese cities are laboratories for how our increasingly urban world should develop. They are forerunners, pioneers.

Cities are the heart of our future. Urban development needs to be at the top of agenda for national policy makers, and cities need to become their partners. Cities are not simply the stage upon which global developments are unfolding, they must become actors too.

This is why from next year, in Europe, all 28 Member States will be obliged to dedicate a certain proportion of their Regional Development Funding to integrated sustainable urban development with a degree of delegation of management to the city level.

We know that Europe's agreed goals for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth by 2020 cannot be achieved without cities. That has led some of our member states to call for a new EU urban agenda. We will launch the debate on that agenda in February, with our 28 member states, and we hope China will be represented at that launch event.

DG REGIO has also been invited by UN HABITAT to lead the European contribution to an international urban agenda for the 21st century, in preparation of the HABITAT III conference in 2016. We look forward to working with China on this important initiative, including in the talks on sustainable urbanisation at the World Urban Forum organised by the United Nations in Colombia next April.

The European Commission has, through DG REGIO great experience in urban development drawn from our work with hundreds of European cities and the networks through which they exchange information on their innovative practices. I am happy to put that experience at the service of the EU-China Urbanisation Partnership. Together we should work for cities that are healthy places to work, resource efficient, attractive for business, but also attractive and easy to live in, and well-integrated with surrounding rural areas.

It essential that our important work together continues, and events like this one are an important contribution.