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Signing Ceremony of the European Charter for the Development of
Social and Societal Initiatives in Train Stations

Brussels, 9 February 2012

****** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ******

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address you at this signing ceremony, which marks the "enlargement" of a very important initiative.

First I would like to congratulate the new signatories for joining the Charter; and also the existing ones for what they have achieved so far.

The Charter is a good example of corporate social responsibility working properly. It addresses a pressing social problem, and it is concrete in its aims and commitments.

You may know that the Commission adopted a new policy document on CSR last October. We have been very clear in this Communication about the fact that government needs the help of the private sector in addressing poverty and disadvantage.

And a number of things you are doing are in keeping with the spirit of good CSR.

The first important element is your outreach to other stakeholders. Just as government needs companies to be concerned about social issues, you need other stakeholders to be able to help you adequately address the poverty that you are faced with at railway stations. This inclusive approach is very important.

A second, related, point is the local focus of your initiative and the awareness of the broader urban context. Consideration of the social and environmental context in which a company operates is an essential element of CSR, especially if we speak about disadvantaged communities. I welcome your voluntary commitment to trying to improve the overall urban environment.

Finally, I welcome your commitment to transparency about what you are doing. Many companies do not report on their CSR activities because they do not see the added value of doing so. In my view, however, if a company is paying genuine attention to CSR – as I believe you are – more transparency can only enhance its reputation. By making sure that your internal and external constituencies know about the problem and what you

are doing about it, you will also stand a better chance of being able to solve it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Railway stations are a place of work, business and activity essential to daily life and to the health of our economies. They are also often a destination for people who have nowhere else to go. Among them are certainly homeless people, and we are seeing again this winter that homelessness is a painful problem of our societies, with dozens of people freezing to death across Europe because they have nowhere to go.

But the issue of poverty and exclusion at railway stations is not exclusively about homeless people. Stations often serve as a refuge for people with drink and drug problems or problems with mental health, newly-arrived migrants, or for young people who were drawn to seek their future in a city but did not find it.

Unfortunately, as you will know all too well, there are also those who come to prey on the vulnerable, and the overall effect can at times be a "shop window" of what is worst in life.

Unfortunately, we are also seeing in some countries or cities the emergence of tendencies or even strategies to exclude

marginalised people from public areas. This is sometimes undertaken by means which compromise human dignity and which simply cannot be justified for the purpose of security or comfort of the majority. The positive and active approach you have taken in this Charter is therefore particularly important.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Charter and its ethos fits well with the Commission's approach to social inclusion. We take a broad approach to social needs, which goes far wider than the traditional view on social policy. We acknowledge the value added and the responsibility of all actors and we emphasise the need for innovative and cooperative solutions.

More broadly speaking, the approach of the Charter also fits well with that of the Europe 2020 strategy, which sets out a model for sustainable growth with a strong social dimension.

I am glad that the Commission was able to contribute to the success of your initiative through its support of two related social experimentation projects: *Hope in Stations*, which has just finished, and *Work in Stations*, which has just started. The services of the Commission have carefully followed the work done under the project *Hope in Stations*. The project has been

a real success, and I would like to pay tribute to those in your companies who have contributed to it.

Your project has generated several social innovations, such as the job of the "reference authority" at a railway station, functioning as a link between the needs of the railway company, the public authorities and the NGOs, and creating fluidity and confidence among all stakeholders. Also, the common training programme that has been implemented has had a proven positive impact on the professional practice of the employees. I would like to invite you to expand these innovations as a model for train stations elsewhere in Europe. Another thing that could be explored is the possibility to extend the training programme various to subcontractors operating in the station.

Both of the projects I mentioned have been supported under the umbrella of the *European initiative for social innovation and social experimentation*. Social experimentation is a way of encouraging innovative solutions, documenting their impact and scaling them up in order to develop more cost-effective ways of responding to social needs.

By definition, social experimentation depends heavily on the inventiveness of citizens, civil society organisations and local

communities. But it is also an opportunity for corporate social responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The present economic crisis cannot be an excuse to abandon the commitment to progressively implement the right to live free of poverty. The EU stands ready to help not only through mutual learning, policies and legislation, but also with significant financial support through the EU funds.

I hope we will see further development of the good work which we are celebrating today. One could think, for example, of:

- possibilities to elaborate a *code of good conduct* for dealing with homeless and socially excluded people in stations;
- helping develop similar initiatives in metro systems;
- further increasing the visibility of your initiative at the European and national levels;
- or further expanding the valuable trainings for station staff.

But I am sure I am not the only person here who has good ideas, so let me stop here by congratulating you once again on

this initiative and encouraging you to continue developing it with the same positive spirit.

Thank you for your attention.