

SPEECH BY  
THE REGIONAL UNDERSECRETARY FOR EUROPEAN AFFAIRS AND EXTERNAL COOPERATION OF  
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE AZORES

**10<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum “European Union - Overseas Countries and Territories”**

24 January 2012

Opening Session, 9:30

*Mr. European Commissioner for Development*

*Mr. President of the Association of Overseas Countries and Territories, Premier of Montserrat,*

*Heads of the Member States' Delegations,*

*Members of the European Parliament,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen, Heads and Members of the Delegations of the Overseas Countries and Territories,*

*Mr. Director-General for Development and Cooperation of the European Commission,*

*Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen.*

On behalf of the President of the Conference of the Outermost Regions and President of the Government of the Azores, Carlos César, I obviously start by greeting all participants in the Annual European Union - Overseas Countries and Territories Forum.

President César unfortunately is unable to be here today, leaving me with the task of representing him at this important meeting, as the member of the Azores Government in charge of European affairs and external cooperation.

Firstly, I would like to express to the European Commissioner for Development and to the President of the Association of Overseas Countries and Territories the appreciation of the President of the Conference of the Outermost Regions for the invitation and for the opportunity to share this moment of common reflection, which is also a celebration of friendship and of the spirit of Europe.

Never before has it been so important to underline and, above all, to ensure the prevalence of the fundamental values of Europe.

EU territories and those associated with the Union are all part of the great European family. This means that we are an active part of a unique process in history, founded on the will of citizens and of their territories.

EU is a generational project based on solidarity and cohesion which aims to achieve a smart and inclusive sustainable development. Above all, we are part of a process that is grounded – and this is the only way for future success – in freedom, in diversity and in dialogue between regions and between different levels of power.

But an effective response to the crisis that affects (and attacks) us at various levels cannot consist only of words. It relies in actions which undoubtedly demonstrate the relevance, the timeliness and the future of the European project.

The global projection of Europe, of its values and of its development model is without doubt crucial to this process; a dimension that cannot be separated from our territories. The Outermost Regions – part of the European Union – and the Overseas Countries and Territories – associated to the Union – are, without exception, examples of the relevance and global affirmation of the European values.

In fact, notwithstanding the different legal and constitutional statutes of our territories, it is not difficult to find similarities among the eight Outermost Regions and the twenty six Overseas Countries and Territories.

Although with different levels and degrees, all territories are isolated and distant from the centre of Europe and from the Member States. We are mostly islands, quite often constrained by adverse geography and climate, with small and fragmented markets, with few alternatives to our traditional products, and with a duality that is common:

- on one hand, we are part of extra-European geographical areas and, on the other hand, having an institutional and political proximity to the EU and its Member States.

But we also have a vast and valuable biodiversity (on land and sea), we are natural laboratories for scientific observation (namely for climate-change) and for research (in oceanography, volcanology, aerospace technology, biotechnology, or renewable energies).

In short, as a result of their territorial features and geostrategic position, the Outermost Regions and the OCTs are also an “asset” for the European Union, a word that, by becoming part of the European lexicon, highlights the change in paradigm in the way how Europe regards both realities.

Actually, the possibility granted by the Treaty of Lisbon to change the statute of the OCTs of France, Denmark and the Netherlands to Outermost Regions (as Mayotte in 2014) and also of making the opposite change (as St. Bartholomew in 2012) provides us with a clear picture of the proximity between the territorial features of the two statutes.

Consequently, our challenges – though framed in different legal and constitutional contexts at the national and European levels – are also similar. All of these factors only advise a deeper proximity, more dialogue and better cooperation between the OCTs and the Outermost Regions.

In the discussions of the EU policies for the 2014-2020 period, there is therefore an opportunity not only to affirm this need, but above all for the European institutions to embrace this potential.

Thus, we were particularly pleased by the Commission's proposals that include measures to strengthen the socio-economic cooperation between the Outermost Regions and the OCTs, including the Caribbean, West Africa and Indian Ocean, especially the provisions to reinforce the allocations of the European Regional Development Fund for Territorial Cooperation.

On the other hand, being aware of the difficulties of coordination between the EDF and ERDF, we were also pleased with the guideline determining the 11<sup>th</sup> EDF implementing regulation to include simplified mechanisms for joint management and an improved flexibility in the financing of cooperation projects between the Outermost Regions and the OCTs.

But, as we know, we still have a long road ahead of us, something which only reinforces the importance of the European Parliament, of the Member States in the Council.

As it has already been stressed, 2012 is a year of utmost importance to our collective future, with the discussions on the EU financial framework and sectorial policies.

The ORs have carefully prepared this moment in advance, particularly through two cross-cutting documents that aimed to contribute to the renewal of the Union's partnership with the ORs in light of the new guidelines and, in particular, of the Europe 2020 Strategy:

- The Memorandum "ORs in the 2020 Horizon", signed by the Presidents of the Outermost Regions in 2009, and the Memorandum "A Renewed Vision of the European Strategy for Outermost Regions", signed in May 2010 by the Outermost Regions and the States of Portugal, Spain and France.

In these and other sectorial documents – such as the joint contribution “For the Regional Integration of the ORs” from October 2010 - regional cooperation is a decisive issue for the development of this partnership between the European Union and our Regions, and we certainly hope that this issue is developed in the new Communication from the Commission on the Outermost Regions, which will be adopted during the first semester of this year.

We all know that the current context is not favourable. Quite the contrary.

But Europe will not overcome the current crisis – which is global, European, but also regional – unless it deepens its integration and, for what concerns us here, it will never be able to affirm itself globally without dialogue, stability, and the development of its strategic partners.

Despite the different statutes that separate us, Outermost Regions and Overseas Countries and Territories are true assets whose potential has to be embraced for the benefit of the European projection throughout the world.

I thank you once again for your invitation, and I am certain that during this Forum the Outermost Regions of the European Union will take note and learn from the example of the Overseas Countries and Territories.

*Rodrigo Oliveira*

*Regional Undersecretary for European Affairs and External Cooperation  
of the Government of the Autonomous Region of the Azores*