



“The voice of SMEs in Europe”

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE ISSUE

“Responsible Entrepreneurship”: SMEs’ awareness is key to a wider CSR uptake

- Attempts to create “CSR standards” are worrisome and counterproductive, says UEAPME

Brussels, 3 May 2007. Increasing small businesses’ awareness on the need to integrate social and environmental issues into their daily work is one of the keys to stimulate innovation, foster social cohesion and create growth and quality jobs in Europe. However, attempts to regulate or impose standards on CSR practices must be resisted, according to UEAPME, the European craft and SME employers’ organisation. Speaking at the “Responsible Entrepreneurship Exchange” conference organised by the European Commission today (Thursday), Secretary General **Hans-Werner Müller** reiterated UEAPME’s commitment to further raise CSR awareness among crafts and SMEs and denounced the risks of the forthcoming ISO 26000 standards on CSR.

During his speech, Mr Müller welcomed the findings of the European Expert Group report on CSR and SMEs, entitled “Opportunity and Responsibility”, which was presented at the conference. The report rightly pinpoints the importance of partnerships within and between stakeholder groups, as well as the key role of existing business support organisations and SME intermediaries in channelling information on CSR to their members. He also reminded participants of the importance of business-led initiatives such as the European Alliance on CSR.

“Nowhere than in small and medium-sized enterprises is the link between entrepreneurship, values and responsibility stronger. Closer ties with the local community and long-lasting interests in its development make acting in a socially responsible manner one of the key features of European SMEs’ business model”, said Mr Müller. *“Our challenge now is to get more SMEs to do more CSR, although the recent attempts to institutionalise and standardise CSR practices are a worrying development in this respect.”*

Mr Müller singled out the ongoing work at ISO on the so-called “guidance standard on social responsibility” as a possible obstacle to CSR practices in small businesses. ISO 26000 aims at giving organisations harmonised, internationally agreed guidance for social responsibility, regardless of their size and nature. The standard will therefore not be adapted to the needs and practices of SMEs. Moreover, while ISO claims that the drafting process is as democratic and as transparent as possible, SMEs are not included as stakeholders on their own right even if they are more than 99% of the potential users. *“While CSR is indeed a valuable concept, we do not believe that it is something measurable in terms of performance”,* continued Mr Müller. *“The last thing we need to encourage a wider CSR uptake in SMEs is a complex and abstract document promoting a quantitative approach to what is essentially a qualitative issue”,* he explained.

Mr Müller went on to insist on the need to place the CSR concept in the enterprise itself. CSR must give concrete answers to real experiences and difficulties, shortcomings and desired improvements that the entrepreneur considers useful for his/her enterprise. Most of the times, this means that the owner-manager of an SME will be the gateway to introduce CSR in its business practices. To this end, UEAPME recently launched a two-year project that will develop tools and activities to support intermediary business organisations in improving the competitiveness of their member SMEs through actions of responsible entrepreneurship (1).

“We are committed to ensure that more and more SMEs integrate CSR concerns in their work. We believe, however, that imposing standards is not appropriate in this case. Socially responsible initiatives are so diverse that they cannot be reduced to ‘one-size-fits-all’ benchmarks”, he concluded.

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(1) More information can be found online: http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/csr/documents/projects/project_summary_ueapme.pdf

EDITORS’ NOTES: UEAPME is the employers’ organisation representing crafts, trades and SMEs from the EU and accession countries at European level. UEAPME has 81 member organisations, which represent crafts and SMEs across Europe, covering over 11 million enterprises with 50 million employees. UEAPME is a European Social Partner.

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