Small and medium-sized enterprises SMEs, craft sector: coordination of actions. 1997 report

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OBJECTIVE: presentation of 1997 report on the coordination of Community activities to assist SMEs and the craft sector under the third multiannual programme for SMEs of 1996. SUBSTANCE: the report provides an overview of the Community's activities to assist SMEs seeking to raise the profile of the Union's action and help make it more coherent and efficient. The report is structured on two priorities: improving the SME environment and increasing access to Community support measures. (1) improving the SME environment: to improve the administrative, legal, fiscal and financial environment for SMEs, the Commission is keen to take greater account of the specific features of SMEs in drawing up all Community policies relating to the internal market, competition, taxation, social policy and the environment. The coordination of measures to assist SMEs is achieved through the SME impact-assessment sheet for legislative proposals and measures to simplify legislation relating to the internal market. Following the Treaty of Amsterdam, the Commission set up a 'BEST' Task Force to simplify the business environment for SMEs. Other initiatives have been taken, such as work on payment periods and the transfer of businesses, improvement of the financial environment of SMEs, the change-over to the euro and employment (guidelines on employment drawn up at the Luxembourg Summit); (2) access to SME programmes and support measures: the measures taken by the Commission are aimed primarily at access to finance and credit support for the development of SMEs in disadvantaged regions and the Europeanization and internationalization of SMEs and measures to strengthen their competitiveness and improve access to research, innovation and training, promoting the spirit of enterprise and greater awareness of the environmental dimension. Concerning information, the measures taken involve mainly the Euro Info centres; Europeanization and internationalization is achieved through inter-enterprise cooperation networks (BC-NET and BRE) and the EUROPARTENARIAT and INTERPRISE programmes. Measures concerning the crafts sector included the organization of the Third European Conference on the Craft Industry in Milan. Finally, in order to promote the creation of joint ventures within the European Union, the Commission has adopted the new programme entitled 'JEV' and supports environment measures (Euromanagement-Environment). Other programmes concern the Structural Funds (ESF-ADAPT), programmes of research and development (fourth RDT framework programme), vocational training (Leonardo), international cooperation (PHARE-TACIS, MEDA, AL- and ASIA-INVEST). Finally, the Commission supports measures in the fields of quality and standardization, innovation, the environment (ECO-AUDIT), transport, energy and the audio-visual industry. SME participation in European Social Fund and other programmes has increased. However, the Commission considers that there is room for further improvement and it intends to encourage cooperation between Member States by organizing the exchange and transfer of good practice in improving and simplifying the business environment. Moreover, a structured dialogue between the Commission and the professional organizations concerned ensures that adequate account is taken of the situation of SMEs and that political actions are implemented within the institutions.