

Belfast, 14 April 2008

"The cohesion policy programmes : launching in partnership the development take-off for Northern Ireland in the period 2007-2013"

Speech of Commissioner Danuta Hübner

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen.

This morning we launched the Northern Ireland Task Force report – this afternoon we are launching the three ERDF operational programmes. This is indeed a very important - and productive - day for our partnership.

The Lisbon agenda and the competitiveness programme

As I said this morning, the work of the task force is rooted in taking the achievement of peace and using it to propel Northern Ireland forward in pursuit of prosperity. Without peace this is of course not possible.

There is a strong European Dimension to this process and I believe that the programmes we are launching today demonstrate the EU's continuing commitment to Northern Ireland. They also provide a response to the priority in Northern Ireland's Programme for Government on "growing a more dynamic and innovative economy".

The competitiveness programme, the cross-border programme between Ireland, NI and Scotland as well as the PEACE III programmes will bring EU investment support to the region in the order of 724M€ and will be of critical importance to transform our common Growth and Jobs Agenda into reality. This funding will also attract private investments. Indeed, the leverage effect is very strong in the EU funded cohesion policy programmes.

In 2006 member states across the Union agreed to “ earmark” a certain proportion of their cohesion policy resources and concentrate investments on the key drivers of the renewed growth and jobs agenda. On the European level we had earmarking targets of 60% of cohesion funding in the convergence regions and 75% in the competitiveness regions like Northern Ireland. These two targets have been reached and more. 65% under the “Convergence” objective and 82% under the “Regional Competitiveness and employment” or some 226 billion euros - plus national co-financing and leveraged private capital - will be spent on key Lisbon investments in the 2007-2013 period.

Indeed, the renewed Lisbon Agenda has made it clearer than ever that the scope and nature of changes in the world economy as well as the other global challenges such as demography and energy supply make it all the more necessary for Northern Ireland to maintain its efforts to hone its competitive edge and innovative capacity. In this context, I am pleased to say that the ERDF Northern Ireland programme will be contributing above the EU average to the type of investment encouraged by Lisbon. Indeed, an impressive 85% of your ERDF Competitiveness and Employment programme resources have been reserved for Growth and Jobs Agenda activities.

With this high earmarking percentage, the programme provides a practical response to the challenges confronting the region: to restructure and to modernise in a sustainable way. I have always been impressed by the resilience and determination of the people of Northern Ireland in making a break with the past and in moving forward to an era of stability and renewed prosperity. I believe and hope that this programme will give you the right tools to continue on this constructive path.

The cross-border cooperation programme

Of course, a successful Northern Ireland economy depends also on openness to the rest of Europe and to the rest of the world. The all-island economy approach represents an opportunity to be fostered and developed in the framework of the European cross-border cooperation programme. We have therefore agreed together some key areas for joint action including the promotion of research and innovation, tourism, infrastructure, labour market and, of course, the environment. In addition, a new ingredient - cross-border cooperation with Scotland - will help strengthen North-South cooperation and open up new possibilities for joint action.

PEACE III

Such prospects are possible today because Northern Ireland and the Border Region were able to move forward with the peace and reconciliation process, a process to which the EU has enthusiastically lent its support. A clear expression of further support is the PEACE III programme which I am very proud to be launching today. As I've mentioned already, the peace and reconciliation process in Northern Ireland and the Border Region has come a long way since 1995 when the first PEACE programme was adopted. And, PEACE III has evolved too. The previous PEACE programmes addressed both economic and social aspects of peace and reconciliation. The new programme now primarily aims to support social and shared community-based measures on a cross-border basis, allowing the communities to work ever closer together.

I know that peace and reconciliation is a long-term process and this is why the PEACE programme is running for a further seven years. I

believe this gives the appropriate time to foster a clear bottom-up approach which will give the opportunity to people on the ground, from both communities, to become engaged further and try to find common solutions to common concerns. In this way people and communities acquire a sense of ownership of the programme and become pivotal and indispensable players in the peace and reconciliation process.

In closing, I would like to stress the fact that Cohesion policy and the result of the Task Force report are not just about funds but about new ideas, innovative thinking and creativity, based on good partnership working. We know, based on our experiences, that you will use these funds effectively. And I can assure you that the Commission will provide the good co-operation that you have come to expect of us.

The Commission will be with you all the way to, as Dr Paisley said earlier this morning, make this place one of the best places in the world.

Thank you.