

Belfast, 14 April 2008

**"The Northern Ireland Task Force Report : launching in partnership
the Northern Irish development take-off for the period 2007-2013"**

Speech of Commissioner Danuta Hübner

Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am absolutely delighted to be here in Belfast to launch the Northern Ireland Task Force report and, after the lunch break, three cohesion policy programmes. Indeed, I feel that today is an important date for Northern Ireland and the Commission to show that we stand together to make reconciliation work, celebrating, if you will, the EU supported development opportunities for the region in the period 2007-2013.

The Task Force Report

The Task Force Report as well as the programmes represent a tangible expression of the Commission's and the European Union's support to Northern Ireland, accelerating progress to achieve a democratic, an inclusive but also a competitive society.

Indeed, the report can be seen as a detailed descriptive of future development possibilities for the region. But the Task Force is not just a report, it is also a process, stimulating mutual confidence and constructive attitudes in the region but also giving the Commission an unprecedented opportunity for partnership working with the Northern Ireland authorities and other interested parties.

The Task Force report looks both ways. While reviewing the past Northern Ireland track record, the report importantly flags the way

forward towards further co-operation and toward deeper involvement in all EU policies and funding instruments. Please allow me to make a few additional remarks on the flavour and ingredients of the report.

Firstly it makes clear that Northern Ireland has a creditable track record in terms of past involvement in EU policies. For example, successful implementation of cohesion policy programmes – including PEACE – has paid clear and visible dividends. Northern Ireland has also played its part in supporting business and innovation through its INVEST-NI agency. R&D framework programmes have also witnessed active participation and leadership from Northern Ireland research institutes. All these – and other – examples illustrate that Northern Ireland has already seized opportunities and delivered results – even in immensely difficult conditions. It is important to realize that we're not starting from scratch. There is a history.

The report is equally clear, however, that more can be done if Northern Ireland is to benefit from all the opportunities that the EU policies and funds clearly provide.

Secondly, therefore, the Report is about the future. It describes a number of ways in which the people of Northern Ireland can build on past successes by pursuing, through EU policies and instruments identified by all relevant Commission services, the goals of sustainable economic, social and environmental development. This is reinforced, of course, by the ongoing efforts to secure and bolster peace and reconciliation across Northern Ireland.

Through our direct contacts with the Northern Ireland authorities, I know that these EU opportunities will be enthusiastically seized – varying from increasing the number of ERASMUS placements to give an educational

boost to your uniquely young population, from higher participation rates in the 7th Framework Programme and boosting university engagement in new knowledge innovation clusters, to making inroads to networks in the environment and renewable energy fields. The opportunities and leads identified in the report also concern such varied topics as organising a conference with a European dimension on antidiscrimination in early June 2008, making bids for the TEN-Transport programme and applications for quality food schemes in the EU.

These are just some examples, but all these leads and many more have been identified in the report giving the region the keys to transform these opportunities to a reality in terms of a better life and more opportunities for the Northern Irish citizens.

I have been proud to lead the work of this quite unique task force since it was set up last year following a commitment by President Barroso and myself in order to assist you on the way to reconciliation and development. Indeed, many across Europe and the world look on at the transformation of society here as it moves ahead after conflict. There are many countries which have suffered conflict, also in Europe, and which can benefit greatly from Northern Ireland's experience.

In the work of the task force, the idea of an International Facility or Centre for Conflict Resolution has been strongly emphasized. We find this idea very interesting and hope any future facility will become a point of reference for conflict transformation for the EU as a whole. As I have said to your ministers, the Commission is ready to examine together with the NI authorities the ways forward for such an idea.

As for the future of the task force, the Commission is committed to working in partnership with Northern Ireland to take forward the work that

the Task Force has started. It is the end of the beginning, indeed this involvement will continue at various levels and I hope that this is the beginning of a new phase of our partnership.

For sure, the Commission will remain a sturdy partner in this process at both political and operational levels.

In closing and just to give you an idea of my commitment on perhaps a more personal level, I am pleased to confirm my intention to open a position in my Cabinet in October for a Northern Ireland secondee. This person will be dealing with challenging work within my team and there will also be scope for that person to help the implementation of the Task Force work.

I sincerely wish our partners well as they embark on following up on the leads in the report and transforming these into new investment, new confidence and new jobs.

Thank you for your attention and also for the way in which we worked together.