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Commissioner Mandelson's open letter to Namibian civil society
Brussels, 2 September 2008

Thank you for your open letter of 4 March 2008 about the interim EPA initialled between the EU and SADC at the end of 2007.

I welcome the engagement of civil society organisations in EPA process. EPAs should not only be government-led initiatives. Civil society and business organisations need to be fully associated in a transparent and comprehensive manner.

You say that SADC Member States initialled the IEPA 'in haste and under immense pressure'. In fact, negotiations took place over several years. The timing and basis of the negotiations was agreed by both sides at the outset because we all knew that we faced a WTO-imposed deadline of December 2007 to complete the essential elements of the negotiation. That deadline reflected the fact that the existing trade provisions of Cotonou were incompatible with international trade rules, and other developing countries had challenged them, arguing successfully that Cotonou discriminated unfairly against them. Some countries, although having agreed the timetable for negotiations, seemed to believe that the deadline was not real. In reality, the only legal basis on which we could continue and improve the trade regime between the EU and SADC region was on the basis of an interim Economic Partnership Agreement. Without the interim EPA we would have faced disastrous impacts on trade between the EU and the SADC. With the interim EPA, we have not only secured but improved our trade relationship, not least to the benefit of Namibian beef exporters.

On the concerns raised by Namibia, I have made clear that we are ready to discuss matters covered by the IEPA in the framework of the full EPA negotiations. This means that as a pre-requisite both sides should sign what has already been agreed before re-engaging on the different issues. As President Barroso said in Lisbon last year that "interim agreements are not Economic Partnership Agreements but instruments to avoid that any African country would be worse off as of the 1st of January 2008. " He added that, concerning the follow-up, "we will then have ample time to discuss more in depth the issues relating to the strengths and weaknesses of regional integration for African development".

Regional integration remains a core element of EU development policy. The Commission has been the main external supporter of regional organisations in Africa. We see great potential for regional integration in Southern Africa through SACU and SADC and the EPA can play its part in simplifying trade relations to the benefit of traders in the region and in Europe. In the SADC EPA group for instance, trade was governed before by four

different regimes: TDCA (for South Africa); Cotonou and GSP (for the other middle income ACP countries) and EBA for Least Developed Countries. Overall, the EPA should streamline existing trade relations between the EU and countries in Southern Africa.

This year is important for the EPAs. In 2007 we focused on meeting the WTO deadline, understandably because of the risk of losing the tariff preferences. The interim EPAs we concluded were largely confined to trade in goods. This year negotiations will focus on achieving fully comprehensive and pro-developmental EPAs and I hope that Namibia will be fully associated with these talks.