

# Cotonou Infokit

## Political Dialogue

*A deeper and wider political dialogue lies at the core of the strengthened political partnership envisaged by the Cotonou Agreement. It is part of a comprehensive and integrated strategy for achieving the common objectives of ACP-EU cooperation (i.e. poverty reduction, the integration of the ACP countries into the world economy, and sustainable development). This fiche outlines the central aspects of this 'deeper' and 'wider' political dialogue.*

### A Dialogue on What? The Substance

Political dialogue is not new in ACP-EU cooperation. However, in the past, political debates between the two parties tended to focus on a relatively narrow set of issues (primarily linked to political conditionalities) and to be organised in a rather rigid and formalised manner (e.g. in the form of high-level ministerial meetings), leaving little scope for open and frank discussion.

All this is now set to change. The Cotonou Agreement seeks to turn political dialogue into a key tool for managing the partnership relationship and raising commitment on both sides. A revitalised dialogue should serve a number of different purposes:

- It can facilitate agreement on cooperation priorities with a view to attaining the development objectives of ACP-EU cooperation.
- It allows the partners to assess progress on human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law, the 'essential elements' of the partnership. This, in turn, may help to avoid any need to use measures of last resort such as the suspension of aid.

- Dialogue can also be used to address new areas with a major impact on development such as peace, conflict prevention, arms trade, migration, etc.
- Dialogue is not limited to the national level. It is equally important at a regional level (e.g. with a view to negotiating economic partnership agreements) and at a global level (e.g. with a view to defending ACP interests in international fora).

### A Dialogue with Whom? The Actors

The Cotonou Agreement recognises the right of ACP states to determine their development strategies 'in all sovereignty'. Central government agencies will therefore be the primary actors and the EU's interlocutors in political dialogue processes. However, one of the main innovations of the new Agreement is to associate representatives of civil society with this dialogue (Article 8). The involvement of civil society is considered to be particularly important in peace-building processes (Article 11). This commitment to secure the participation of civil society is also reflected in the provisions that regulate the working methods of the ACP-EU joint institutions (Articles 14-17). The Agreement envisages that both the ACP-EU Council of Ministers and the Joint Parliamentary Assembly will organise an ongoing dialogue with representatives of ACP-EU economic and social partners and with other civil-society actors in order to obtain their views on the attainment of the Agreement's objectives.

Beyond the arena of non-state actors, new governmental organisations such as the regional organisations SADC, ECOWAS or COMESA are also seen as appropriate interlocutors in certain areas of the Cotonou political dialogue, depending on their specific expertise and competences.

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## What Sort of Dialogue ? The Mechanisms

The Cotonou Agreement does not provide detailed operational guidance on how to structure dialogue processes, but rather opts for pragmatism and country-specific approaches.

The dialogue is intended to be flexible, with its precise form depending on the issue under consideration. It is to be conducted within or outside the ACP-EU institutional framework of joint institutions, in an appropriate format and at an appropriate level (i.e. regional, sub-regional or national).

Organisations in both the ACP countries and the EU are currently trying to clarify these provisions by drafting joint guidelines for dialogue that can help to initiate dialogue processes and avoid misunderstandings. At the same time, the partners do not wish to fall into the trap of over-formalising the process. Thus, while setting agendas and agreeing timetables can help to clarify expectations on both sides, the dialogue processes must not get bogged down in procedural wrangles, thus preventing people from getting down to the real issues.

The Agreement makes clear that dialogue should be ongoing, regular and wide-ranging in its content and scope. Moreover, it does not need a particular event to trigger the dialogue and it should not be stopped simply because obstacles are encountered in one particular area.

Specific consultation procedures are foreseen when 'essential elements' of the partnership (i.e. respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law) may have been violated (Article 96) or in the event of 'serious cases of corruption' (Article 97). Further information on these procedures is given in Cotonou Infokit No. 20.

A number of ACP countries are concerned that political dialogue will mainly be activated 'when there is a 'major problem' with a given country, rather than being positively used as an instrument to address poverty or improve cooperation. Hence, in the years to come, it will be essential to explore new ways of turning political dialogue into an efficient management tool that is used proactively in the Cotonou cooperation process. Article 8 of the Agreement allows for such constructive approaches to political dialogue.

In 2002, the ACP Secretariat took the initiative to develop, in close consultation with the European Commission, a set of practical guidelines on ACP-EU political dialogue, which have been approved by the ACP Council of Ministers of December 2002.

## A Reciprocal Dialogue? Dealing with Policy Coherence

An interesting innovation in the Cotonou Agreement is the introduction of a consultation procedure on the coherence of Community policies and their impact on the ACP States (Article 12). The Community is invited to inform the ACP States 'in good time' of measures it intends to take 'which might affect the interests of ACP States'. Such a request for information may also be made by ACP States themselves.

These measures should encourage an ACP-EU dialogue that considers ACP concerns and suggestions for policy changes. The Community must give reasons if it does not agree with amendments proposed by the ACP States.