

Post Cotonou 2020: Improving or fundamentally rethinking ACP-EU relations?

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Introduction

In recent months, the future of the ACP-EU Partnership Post 2020 has become a hotly debated issue in both the ACP Group and in the EU.

At the level of the ACP, an Ambassadorial Working Group on Future Perspectives presented an ambitious report at the end of 2014 and an ACP Eminent Persons Group is in the process of finalising its report that should be presented to an ACP Summit of Heads of State later this year or in 2016. On paper at least, there is a growing awareness among ACP actors that the Group will have to transform itself if it wants to realise its ambition of becoming a player of global importance, beyond its longstanding partnership with the EU.

At the EU level, the Commission's Department for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) recently organised 7 small Round Tables with experts that discussed various aspects of the future of the ACP-EU Partnership in a new global context. DEVCO and the EEAS will prepare a joint consultation paper by October that will be submitted to the EU Foreign Affairs Council. A public consultation will be organised at the end of this year and continue into early 2016.

In the European Parliament and in the EU member states the reflection on Cotonou Post-2020 is picking up steam. What happens after the Cotonou agreement expires will also be one of the key priorities of the upcoming Presidencies of the EU by Luxemburg and The Netherlands .

In this context, the initiative by the European Economic and Social Committee and the ACP-EU follow-up Committee is very timely as it provides an opportunity for civil society and social and economic actors to also join this important debate

In my intervention I would like to address three key questions:

1. To what extent is the original rationale of the ACP-EU Partnership (that is, the one enshrined by the Lome Convention of 1975 and the Cotonou agreement of 2000) still valid in 2015?
2. Is the ACP still regarded as the "preferred" group that serves the interests of both governments and non-governmental actors in the ACP? And where does it bring a specific comparative advantage and added value?
3. To what extent can the ACP-EU partnership support common interests between the ACP and EU countries in a Post-2015 world?

1. To what extent is the original rationale of ACP-EU partnership still valid?

The ACP remains the biggest group of states with whom the EU has a partnership. On paper, the Cotonou Agreement remains the most sophisticated framework for a North-South partnership covering political, trade, economic and development cooperation. As a legally binding agreement with joint institutions it is also endowed with a substantially larger share of EU financial resources than any other financial instrument for EU external action, through the European Development Fund. There is no shortage of strong political declarations and statements that continuously stress this “acquis”. However, both ACP and EU actors should not be blind to the fundamental changes that have occurred in the EU, the ACP and more global since 1975 and even 2000. The original post-colonial political and economic rationale for the ACP-EU partnership is no longer present and, on the European side, this is reflected in current Treaties and institutions. The Lisbon Treaty contains no reference to the ACP and the ACP-EU partnership is no longer dealt with on its own but is instead integrated into the pan-African units of the EEAS and DEVCO.

In spite of certain ACP commonalities in terms of vulnerability, there is a growing differentiation of economic, political and social development patterns between “booming” middle income countries and least developed and fragile states.

2. Is the ACP still the “preferred” group that serves the interests of its members?

In the past few years the diverse group of some 79 countries that makes up the ACP has not been able to play a significant **political role** in regional, continental or global affairs. In Africa, the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) increasingly assume a lead role in conflict prevention, peace support operations, maritime security and the fight against transnational organised crime and terrorism. The African Union, unlike the ACP, does include the countries in the politically sensitive North-African region with the exception of Morocco.

Important policy responsibilities in **economics and trade** have gradually moved from the ACP Group to the RECs, who took the lead in the negotiations for Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the EU. Key areas like the transparent management of natural resources, infrastructure, transport, energy and private sector development are increasingly dealt with at the continental and regional levels. The results of these continental and regional frameworks may be mixed but their member states seem to rely more on these than on the ACP Group, which appears to have lost its traction, political clout and bargaining power.

Last but not least – and this should be of interest to this committee - it is becoming increasingly difficult to mobilise civil society under the umbrella of the ACP. When the

Cotonou Agreement was signed in 2000 - business, civil society and local government leaders in the three major ACP regions spontaneously joined forces and established an ACP Business Forum, an ACP Civil Society Forum and an ACP Local Government Platform. The original enthusiasm and dynamics of these ACP umbrella organisations has faded in the course of the years. It is not easy to find common interest between businessmen or women in Africa itself, let alone between African civil society advocates with their Caribbean and Pacific counterparts, for example.

3. To what extent can an ACP-EU Partnership support common interests in global affairs?

With the Lisbon Treaty and the creation of the European External Action Service the EU aims to become a more influential and coherent global player. In order to realise that goal the EU is looking for new allies with the necessary political and economic clout. The current EU-ACP partnership might not be attractive enough for the EU to pursue that goal as it does not have a real value added as a political framework, and one that is able to generate real political leverage.

To some extent, the Cotonou Agreement is a product of the 20th Century - a North-South development partnership largely based on unilateral aid transfers from one party to the other. Beyond this aid relationship, the cohesion and unity of the ACP Group might be rather weak - making the ACP a less attractive partner to the EU than in the past decades.

In recent years, the EU has tried, with fits and starts, to build continental and regional partnerships with more homogenous groups of countries and regions. For the EU, these partnerships hold greater potential for alliance building and joint action on global issues. But joint action based on common interests, with or without the ACP Group, also implies that the EU would support the effective integration of developing countries in the global system.

This is the spirit of the new Post-2015 thinking that seeks to move beyond the traditional North-South paradigm and towards a more “universal agenda” of sustainable development goals. The types of and arrangements to cooperation and partnerships of the future, inevitably, will focus more on the joint management of global challenges, on policy coherence for sustainable development and on reforming the global governance system.

This ambitious agenda will require the joint mobilisation of new sources of finance beyond aid, but more importantly, they will also require more use of non-financial means for collective action. The notion of *common but differentiated responsibilities* will be crucial in the implementation of the post-2015 Agenda. This will also have implications for the EU-ACP partnership.

Obviously, financial solidarity will still be required for the least developed and most fragile states. Yet it will be hard to justify the use of traditional aid in the growing number of Middle Income Countries (MICs). Other types of partnership and cooperation might be more suitable for these (potentially) more wealthy ACP countries where the issue is not “more aid” but supporting proper systems of governance and a fair distribution of domestic resources.

Innovation in the structures of global and regional governance will be needed that give a legitimate place to new institutional actors and stakeholders beyond the traditional development actors.

Conclusion

At global level there is a move towards partnerships beyond aid that are driven by politics and interests – and thus better equipped to deal with pressing global challenges. Both the EU and the ACP subscribe to this global agenda but is there enough cohesion on both sides to negotiate around common interests?

In this context, the debate on the future of the ACP-EU Partnership Post-2020 should not be disconnected from the major strategic reflections that are taking place elsewhere and that will, inevitably, impact on the future ACP-EU partnership. There is an inherent risk that the development institutions will argue in favour of a standalone reflection, as this will provide them with more management control over this process. However, the future of the relationship of the EU with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries is too important – it merits a more strategic political approach by both parties in the partnership.

Both the EU and the ACP need to be crystal clear about their ambitions for what comes after Cotonou. Is it a matter of just *improving the implementation* of Cotonou, or should the partnership be *fundamentally reframed*? If it were to be fundamentally reframed, this should mean opening Pandora’s box. This could pose a threat for parties that have a strong vested interest in continuing with a traditional North-South partnership. However, it would also open a unique opportunity to shape a new type of partnership that is more ambitious and more adapted to current realities, generating as well real interest and traction among the social and economic actors.