Political dialogue: one of the main tools for effective ACP-EC cooperation

Cotonou Agreement, non-state actors (NSAs) are identified in the Guidelines as one of the actors in ACP-EC political dialogue. One of the key objectives of the ACP Group is to ensure the full and timely implementation of the Cotonou Agreement. The ACP Group has instigated a process to pursue a common understanding with the EU on all issues related to political dialogue, and in particular the remaining Articles of Title II (The Political Dimension) and Articles 96, 97 and 98 of the Agreement. The objectives of political dialogue should mirror the principal objectives of the Cotonou Agreement, and facilitate a common understanding and interpretation of the issues concerned, which will enhance the partnership and prevent a situation where one side has to resort to unilateral actions.

Intra-ACP political dialogue
Meaningful dialogue at the ACP-EC level necessitates intra-ACP dialogue, and the parameters for this are enshrined in the Georgetown Agreement of 1975, as amended, the Libreville Declaration, the Santo Domingo Declaration and Plan of Action, and the Nadi Declaration, as adopted by ACP Heads of State and Government. To prepare the ACP Group for effective and sustained dialogue with the EU, the ACP Council of Ministers adopted a “Framework and general principles for intraACP political dialogue” at its 76th Session in Brussels in December 2002, which sets the broad parameters for political dialogue among ACP States. Having agreed on these important building blocks for political dialogue, the political dimension of the Cotonou Agreement can further evolve and enhance the ACP-EC Partnership, and in particular its inclusiveness.

The Framework emphasises the fact that intra-ACP dialogue will observe, inter alia, the principles of sovereignty, equality, ACP solidarity and unity. It looks at the objectives, range of applications, form, levels and issues to be covered during intra-ACP dialogue.

The ACP Group is currently reflecting on a number of proposals to strengthen and better equip and prepare the Group for...
political challenges, opportunities and threats. The fast-evolving global political landscape, the profound internal and external changes to the EU, principle partner of the ACP Group, and the commitment to further enhance ACP solidarity and unity are sufficient reasons for the Group to enhance and expand the modalities and mechanisms for intra-ACP dialogue. The inclusiveness and scope of intra-ACP dialogue were further underscored by the first meetings of ACP Ministers for Research (Science and Technology) and Culture. Meetings of ACP Ministers of Migration, Environment, Health and Education are also being planned.

Improving modalities and mechanisms

The “Framework and general principles for intra-ACP political dialogue” contains a number of proposals to improve the modalities and mechanisms for political dialogue. The ACP Council of Ministers mandated the Committee of Ambassadors to pursue the following proposals:

- establishment of an ACP Early Warning Mechanism (EWM);
- creation of a “Peer Group”; and
- improved utilisation of ACP institutions, or institutional changes.

In pursuit of these proposals, the ACP Group plans to better equip itself to deal with internal issues that require attention, prior to any possible action by the EU. The Group’s objective is to become a more responsible, credible and reliable partner in relations with the EU, and any other relations it might pursue.

ACP regional integration organisations

The expanded nature of the Partnership Agreement necessitates a closer working relationship between ACP regional integration organisations and the ACP Group, in particular the ACP General Secretariat. In the context of political dialogue, the ACP Group relies primarily on ACP regional integration organisations for the implementation of actions related to conflict prevention and management, preventative diplomacy and peacekeeping in the respective regions. Forty-eight (48) ACP states are members of the African Union (AU), and all matters relating to early warning mechanisms, preventative diplomacy and peacekeeping in the African states of the ACP Group are coordinated and managed by the AU’s Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. There is close cooperation and coordination between the ACP General Secretariat and the various organs of the AU, and the AU’s conflict prevention and management efforts are fully supported by the ACP Group.

ACP regional integration organisations will also fulfill a key role during the second phase of ACP-EC negotiations for Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), to begin from September 2003. The integration and importance of these organisations in the ACP-EC dialogue process should not be underestimated, since they should form the building blocks for positions and actions taken by the ACP Group.

Participation of non-state actors (NSAs)

The Cotonou Agreement enshrines the participation of NSAs in the ACP-EC relationship. By agreeing and ratifying the Agreement, ACP states fully acknowledged the role of NSAs in the development of ACP states. The participation of NSAs is to be facilitated at the national and regional levels, although participation of NSAs at the level of the ACP Council of Ministers and Summits of ACP Heads of State and Government is also assured. Integration of NSA participation is a process, and the ACP Group and the EU have agreed to the setting-up of Steering Committees at ACP national and regional levels to ensure the participation of NSAs in decisions relating to European Development Fund (EDF) resources earmarked for NSAs. Furthermore, the ACP General Secretariat is in the process of producing a NSA Guide, which should facilitate NSA participation in the Agreement.

Dialogue outside the ACP-EC framework

The 3rd Summit of ACP Heads of State and Government held in Nadi, Fiji in July 2002 mandated the ACP Group to strengthen the existing relationship with the EU, and to explore the possibility of expanding its relations with other countries and groups of countries. The ACP Group cooperated closely with the G-77 Group during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg during August 2002, and Canada participated in the proceedings of the first Meeting of ACP Ministers of Culture, in Dakar, Senegal in June 2003. Furthermore, at the 5th WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancún in September 2003, the ACP Group, AU and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) formed an Alliance to jointly defend their interests at the Cancún Conference.

The numeric strength of the ACP Group, its desire to become one of the principal spokespersons of the developing world, and the stated objective to enhance the role and visibility of the Group on the international scene, warrant a focus beyond the ACP-EC relationship, of course without neglecting or downgrading existing relations. The focus in pursuing new relations is on the complementary nature that these relations might have on existing activities and programmes. Poverty reduction is one of the key objectives of the ACP Group, and by expanding its international focus through dialogue, the chances of achieving this objective is maximized.

Conclusions

The ACP Group is committed to take full advantage of the many possibilities and opportunities that dialogue offers, and the Group is at present actively engaged in putting in place the building blocks to ensure a sustained and continuous dialogue among its member states, with the EU and other states and groupings of states. Dialogue, and in particular political dialogue, is an indispensable tool that, if fully utilised, would ensure that the ACP Group takes its rightful place in the international world order. ■

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