

Strengthening the ACP Group's identity

Sasara Chasala George is Chair of the ACP Committee of Ambassadors. During the past five years he has also chaired the group charged with amending the Georgetown Agreement, the charter establishing the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP Group), which was signed on 6 June 1975. This involved adapting the ACP secretariat, so that it became more proactive in positioning the Group on the international stage and in identifying the interests of its members. He started by explaining the role and functioning of the Committee of Ambassadors.

Dorothy Morrissey

The ACP Committee of Ambassadors assists the Council of Ministers in performing its functions and carries out any mandate the Council entrusts to it. In particular it monitors the implementation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. It has six specialised sub-committees; Sustainable Development; Political, Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Affairs; Investment and Private sector; Financing and Development (which deals with the EDF); Establishment and Finance, and, finally, the Trade and Commodity Protocols committee which is nowadays very important for us. Cotonou stresses political dialogue and we felt that if we are going to have a genuine political dialogue, the ACPs must organise it also within the ACP Group itself. In the context of political dialogue we have started to have peer discussions, to call others to the political committee to understand their difficulties so that we can advise each other. We send missions, at the level of Committee of Ambassadors, to other ACP countries; for instance, we recently sent a mission to the Central African Republic.

A new role for the Committee of Ambassadors is the promotion and visibility of the ACP Group. We try to meet with other groups outside the usual ACP relations, like the WTO, UNCTAD, the African Union and others.

Do you think the ACP Group has a strong identity as a Group, apart from its relationship with the EU? How has it evolved since Georgetown?

You could say the ACP Group is the child of the ACP-EU partnership. The Group continues to be closely linked to its principle partner, the EU, but this does not necessarily translate into the only reason for its existence. Since its inception in 1975, the membership of the Group has

grown from 40 to 79. The ACP Group is the only organised group of developing countries outside the Non-Aligned Movement. Take the example of Cuba, a member of the ACP Group but not a signatory of the Cotonou Agreement; under the Lomé system, you had to be a member of the Partnership Agreement in order to be a member of the ACP Group. But now, under the new arrangement, we can accept new members, even though they are not signatories of the Partnership Agreement.

Five years ago we started working on amending the Georgetown Agreement. All the amendments were accepted at the ACP Council meeting at the end of November, and the decision was taken to implement them. The amended Georgetown Agreement clearly sets out 15 broad objectives, and one of those is to "establish contacts and relations with other States and groups of States". Furthermore, at the 3rd Summit of ACP Heads of State and Government, held in Nadi, Fiji in July 2002, the ACP Heads called for the Group's enhanced visibility and improved efficiency on the international scene, to enable it to defend the interests of all the ACP members in solidarity and unity. The wish was also expressed by ACP leaders to organise regular consultations between the ACP States and other States or regional and international organisations on issues of key interest to the Group whenever there is a major international meeting, be it Commonwealth, the UN; we meet to identify our interests, so we can speak with one voice. The Group is positioning itself as a player on the international scene, as we have seen in Doha and in Cancún, where we were able to forge relationships with other groups, such as the LDCs, the African Union. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, we issued an ACP Declaration on sustainable development.

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In Havana, at the 6th Session of the Conference of the Parties, we issued a joint ACP-EU Statement on Combating Drought and Desertification. We plan to do the same at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva. Furthermore, we agree as a Group to cede EDF resources to global projects such as the Global Health Fund, the HIPC Initiative.

Furthermore, the ACP Group is a founding member of the World Bank managed International Task Force for Commodity Risk Management for Developing Countries. The ACP General Secretariat maintains relations with numerous international organisations, and has concluded Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with, inter alia, the WHO, WTO, Commonwealth Secretariat and the International Organization of the Francophonie.

For the first time in the ACP-EU relationship, a mid-term review will take place in 2004. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the Cotonou Agreement? What lessons have been learned in the past three years?

The Cotonou arrangement contains some new and daring instruments and the mid-term review will provide an opportunity to look at whether they are working or not. However, as it took almost three years to ratify it, it may be surprising to some that we are having a mid-term review even before we go into implementation. Actually, in some countries implementation has not taken place, but a mid-term review is required by the national and regional indicative programmes and therefore we have no choice.

The core of Cotonou is to eliminate poverty, but it also underscores the important notion of partnership, whose interpretation and implementation is in my view the overarching benchmark for strengths and weaknesses. The notion of partnership is indeed a noble one, but illusive in its implementation: EC unilateralism is a real problem. Also, the decision-making process relating to EDF resources needs to be simpler and more easily understood. To give an example, we got rid of two instruments, Sysmin and Stabex, and replaced them with another mechanism. But no country has yet been able to use this mechanism; it's difficult and complicated to reach the requirements. There are countries that could benefit from it, like for instance the cotton-producing countries. In this sense, in the mid-term review we can point out to our partners that some of the mechanisms we got rid

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of were important for development. I can give another example, where we could make further improvements: countries were told to choose two core sectors in their national indicative programme. HIV/AIDS is a serious concern for many ACP countries. But sometimes as they have only two sectors to choose they feel education is more important because it cuts across sectors; even in the health sector, HIV/AIDS is not necessarily the priority as there are other challenges to face. In the mid-term review, we could ask that at least three sectors be addressed.

However, the Cotonou Agreement covers a period of 20 years, and it would be unfair to make, at this early stage, just three years since signature and less than one year after ratification, a qualitative and quantitative assessment on the strengths and weaknesses of the Agreement. Both sides will soon engage in a process of reviewing the provisions of Cotonou with a view to making relevant amendments to the Agreement both in the main text as well as the annexes.

There has been a recent EU communication on incorporating the EDF into the EU general budget, or "budgetisation". What is the ACP Group's view?

The ACP Group is aware of the European Commission's proposal to integrate the European Development Fund (EDF) into the normal EU budget. The ACP Group has yet to reach a definite position. But whatever decision is taken, it should not be taken without the agreement of the ACP Group, and in conformity with the spirit of our partnership.

The central question is what will be the end result of EDF budgetisation. If it leads to speedy and effective disbursement of funds, it would be welcome. If it reduces the bureaucratic maze that we see at the moment, that would also be welcomed by us. But, we are worried because we don't know the purpose of budgetisation. We wonder what will become of the partnership in terms of decision-making. Now, the element of partnership is there, funds are discussed in the joint Council, and decisions are passed. But if the ACP members of parliament have no say in the European Parliament, where is the notion of partnership in the administration of funds? Who will set the priorities? Theoretically at the moment it is us and the Commission. But is it not going to be the

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European Parliament when the budget is there? What is also worrying is the frequency with which the ACP countries are being discussed in the European Parliament – which in itself is not a bad thing. But it takes place without the ACP countries being involved; we don't have the opportunity. Will it not be the norm, if they control the budget, that they make decisions about what can be done and in what countries, according to their priorities? If we give more power to allocate the budget, set priorities, and we don't have any say in this Parliament, where is the partnership aspect?

We also wonder what will happen to resources, when there are ten new member states, some of whom have no direct experience of the ACP. When they debate this issue, will they agree to any increase or even to the status quo? We are used to five-year cycles in the EDF; how will this be adapted to a one-year budget cycle? These issues need to be clarified.

Most importantly, however, is whether budgetisation will contribute to the achievement of the objective of the Cotonou Agreement – that is, poverty eradication.

I sincerely hope that in future we will have the opportunity to address this issue in a pragmatic, cooperative manner and within the spirit of the Cotonou Agreement. This will ensure that whatever decision is ultimately agreed to will be in the best interest of all parties involved.

A recent EU-commissioned study on the implications of enlargement says the ACP countries will not lose out, as they are protected by the Partnership Agreement. In your view, what are the implications for the ACP Group of next year's enlargement of the EU?

We try to be positive because this is a point in the evolution of Europe. This is not the first enlargement and the ACP Group views it from a positive perspective. The ACP Group has also commissioned a study on EU enlargement, with specific reference to the potential opportunities and threats to the Group. Based on the outcome of this study, we need to position ourselves in such a way as to maximize the advantages of enlargement, and minimize its potential disadvantages. However, I have no

doubt in my mind that the special ACP-EU relationship will continue, and even be strengthened in future.

What does the failure at Cancún mean for the EPA process, given that the WTO is a reference point in these negotiations?

Cancún has been a very great disappointment, more so to us as the ACP Group. Cancún to us represents a lost opportunity, because our EPA process was based on a development agenda. We have argued that the WTO rules are not favourable to developing countries, especially the ACP countries. We were trying to argue for more development-oriented, flexible rules that take into account the interests of developing countries. So, if we negotiate an EPA now, when there is still a stalemate, we may find ourselves concluding one under rules which are unfavourable to ourselves, on issues where we wanted to get some direction from the multilateral, WTO level. So it is a great lost opportunity. Cancún was not a useful meeting; positions were polarised and dogmatic. We are seeing more flexibility now; people have learned lessons from Cancún. But we sometimes wonder what flexibility is required of us; we have nothing really much to sell; it is our lives which are at stake. We are not behind subsidies and we have missed deadlines on matters of interest to us. So, flexibility has to come from the other side, the developed countries. We cannot bank on bilateral arrangements; as small countries we are up against the might of more powerful countries. On 15 December, there is an important WTO meeting in Geneva, to look at how the process can be carried forward. We have given instructions to our senior officials who are going there to be as flexible as possible, not to have the dogmatic positions we had in Cancún.

The ACP Group and the EU have a convergence of views that EPAs must be compatible with WTO rules. The negotiation of EPAs is a process, and some ACP regions have already commenced with the second phase of regional negotiations. The conclusions of these negotiations are foreseen for 2007, and we are optimistic that the multilateral trading system will be in a position to make world trade fair by then. ■