

ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly: Overcoming differences for a more effective cooperation

The ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly met for the sixth time in Rome from 11 to 16 October. The session marked a qualitative leap forward in the dialogue on cooperation and showed a willingness to overcome differences to make that cooperation more effective.

François Misser

The Rome session launched new working methods within the Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA). Keen to rationalise and improve the quality and follow-up of their work, members limited the number of resolutions to five, instead of the large number of motions up to then. Their discussions focused on relations between the three new committees (Economic Development, Finance and Trade; Social and Environmental Affairs; and Political Affairs). The proceedings also centred on two emergency debates: on the future of trade relations after the setback at the WTO meeting in Cancún; and on the situation in West Africa.

Rome was the first meeting held in Europe since the session scheduled for Brussels in November 2002. That meeting had been cancelled due to disagreement on attendance by Zimbabwean delegates. A lesson learned at Rome was that different approaches to the crisis in Zimbabwe no longer jeopardise the progress of JPA business. A fairly widespread wish to find specific solutions to this crisis emerged. In response to a request from the ACP countries, JPA Co-President Adrien Houngbedji, from Benin, had led an exploratory mission to Harare in September, with the aim of preparing for a possible joint ACP-EU mission. A consensus emerged within the JPA in favour of this initiative. The mission's terms of reference have yet to be finalised – a sensitive task which has been referred to the JPA Bureau. As Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Bashir Khanbhai put it, the mission had to find out whether Zimbabwean justice was “genuinely independent”. Indeed, MEP Colette Flesch thought that the mission to Zimbabwe could only take place if members secured “a guarantee that they could meet both the opposition and the government”. Echoing South Africa's Ntshadi Martha Tsheole, ACP members felt that “the JPA's role must be to open dialogue and negotiations” between the EU and Zimbabwe. However, Kumbirai

Kangai, representing Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF, cast some doubt on whether such a mission would in principle be acceptable to the Harare government. He argued that some people within the JPA were “totally unable to envisage the possibility of an improvement of the Zimbabwe situation”. Koos Richelle, Director-General of the EU's Development directorate, disputed claims by several ACP parliamentarians that ordinary people would be hardest hit by EU sanctions. He pointed out that the EU was providing humanitarian aid to Zimbabwe, adding that only a few prominent figures were subject to sanctions. Richelle reminded delegates that the decisions affecting these people had been taken as part of the consultations opened under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement, and would stand until February 2004. “If progress is made between now and then, relations between the EU and Zimbabwe might be normalised”, he added.

Willingness to compromise also emerged in the debate on West Africa. The resolution passed at the end of the session welcomed the EU grant of €50 million to finance the peace process in Liberia, but urged the EU and its humanitarian office ECHO to scale up their response to the serious humanitarian situation in that country. It called upon Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo and the other signatories of the Marcoussis peace accord to start work without delay on the reunification of Côte d'Ivoire and the strengthening of its democracy, with a view to the elections in 2005. The resolution condemned the coup in Guinea Bissau and the attempted coup in Mauritania. Finally, it expressed the hope that the forthcoming elections to the senate and town councils in Togo would be transparent and open to the whole range of the opposition. It urged the EU to boost its humanitarian aid programmes, in the expectation that the political dialogue envisaged in the Cotonou Agreement could lead to a resumption of cooperation.

Conflict in Africa: the Peace Facility

The emphasis of the debates on the crises in Africa was on prevention, resolution and mitigation of their consequences. This sentiment was influenced by the Political Committee's report on the rights of children and on child soldiers, written by Uganda's Ephraim Kamuntu and Italy's Vitaliano Gemelli. They called on the EU and ACP countries to promote children's rights and act against the use of child soldiers, as "a priority of their policy" (according to the UN special representative for children and armed conflicts, Olara Otunnu, there are 120,000 child soldiers in Africa). The JPA rallied in support of the rapporteurs' motion to adopt targeted sanctions against warlords who enlist children. Such sanctions would include restrictions on the movements of these warlords, and exclusion from any amnesty and from holding government office. The JPA also declared its support for sanctions against individuals and companies whose activities exacerbated armed conflict and abuse of children. The delegate of one of the countries most affected, deputy speaker of the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Adolphe Onusumba, deplored that promises made by the supporters of the demobilisation of child soldiers had remained "a dead letter". He added that vocational training centres had been very late in taking responsibility for them, and their return to their families had been long delayed. Onusumba himself is an ex-leader of one of the former rebel RDC factions. A working document drafted by MEP General Philippe Morillon referred to the need to take responsibility for ex-combatants and called on the European Commission to give priority to their economic and social rehabilitation, especially by offering child soldiers access to education. Reflecting the JPA's determination to ensure follow-up of the subjects of its debates, there will be a specific report on the subject, to be presented at the next session in Addis Ababa. As for conflict resolution, the JPA welcomed the announcement by European Commissioner Poul Nielson, that a "peace facility" was to be set up to finance peacekeeping operations in Africa, in line with the commitment made at the African Union summit in Maputo. Philippe Morillon explained that the facility was compatible with the principle of responsibility by Africans themselves for this task. It reflected the priorities of African leaders, who were proposing to form an African intervention force within two years. Nielson explained that the facility respects the principles of solidarity and development. In the wake of a resolution passed at the fifth session in Brazzaville, several members of the JPA, Rob Davies (South Africa), Louis Straker (St Vincent) and European MEPs Hans Meyer, Harlem Desir, Maj Britt Theorin and Miguel Angel Martinez, condemned the American pressure on many countries to sign bilateral agreements that US citizens would not appear before the International Criminal Court. The parliamentarians were particularly concerned at threats to withdraw US financial aid, and called upon the EU to replace this support with Community funding.

Environmental issues not sufficiently taken into account

Implementation of cooperation and the future of trade relations dominated the rest of the proceedings. The Assembly was shocked by the report of the Social and Environmental Affairs Committee on sustainable management and conservation of natural resources in the ACP countries under the 9th European Development Fund (EDF) for the period 2003-2007. The report was dubbed "excellent but terrible" by MEP Marie-Anne Isler Béguin. Nigerian rapporteur Gado Boureima and his Portuguese colleague Joaquim Miranda expressed regret that the cooperation priorities paid little or no attention to environmental aspects. ACP countries, which were free to set their own priorities, shared the blame for this, the Nigerian co-rapporteur added. The rapporteurs noted that, unless environmental issues were at the heart of policies intending to integrate the ACP countries into the world economy, there was a risk of adding pressure on the natural resources of the ACP countries which were mainly suppliers of raw materials. Gado Boureima reported the fear of small fishermen who were seeing stocks dwindling. He was also worried at over-exploitation of the forests. Speaking for the European Commission, Poul Nielson shared Gado Boureima's concerns on desert encroachment in the Sahel. He pledged his willingness to move ahead with his plan to allocate €1 billion of EDF funds to finance a "water facility", as promised at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

Budgetisation of the EDF: a warm welcome, by and large

The use of EDF funds formed the subject of a third report by the Economic, Finance and Trade Committee. It echoed the European Commission's own view of the need for change in the current system, marred by excessively slow disbursements and large unspent balances. MEP Thierry Cornillet, a co-rapporteur, supported the Commission's idea of "budgetising" the EDF after 2007 with a view to efficiency and democratic accountability. This would mean merging it with the EU general budget, but Cornillet insisted on the need to retain the advantages of the present formula. He suggested that the funds earmarked for the ACP countries should be "safeguarded": in other words those countries would still benefit from predictability and the assurance that they would receive a steady flow of development aid. Cornillet said he did understand the fears of ACP

countries that EDF funds “might be watered down” by this budgetisation process, in the global context of Community development aid. Assembly Co-President Glenys Kinnock felt that the ACP countries had to be cautious on the budget question, as no formal decision had yet been made. Chairman of the ACP Council of Ministers, Lieutenant-General Mopathi S. Merafhe, took the view that no decision could be taken without the agreement of the ACP countries. Kinnock accepted this view but, in her opinion, the status quo was not acceptable, as the EU member states, who controlled the EDF, did not always have identical interests. Finally, she thought that the ACP should ask for powers of control if the EDF were merged with the EU budget. Thus the debate on this matter was well and truly open. It will be the subject of the Economic Committee’s next report.

The other co-rapporteur, Zambia’s David Matongo, referring to the mid-term review of the 9th EDF, said he hoped that the exercise would not result in “penalisation” of the countries which performed less well in aid deployment. He asked the European Commission, following its decision to devolve financial decisions to the delegations in order to expedite decision-making and disbursement procedures, to assign more staff.

Cancún

Predictably, the session was dismayed by the setback at the ministerial conference of the WTO in Cancún a month earlier. In Rome, ACP and European delegates were unable to reach agreement on a compromise motion on the subject. During the debates, it was clear that the aftermath of Cancún was still being felt, and positions remained far apart on many points. Before the vote, a motion by Glenys Kinnock and Richard Howitt called upon the European Commission and the EU member states “to cut back all forms of export subsidy”. Their motion expressed a viewpoint close to that of the ACP countries which feel that increasing direct aid to European rice growers might severely hit ACP rice exporters. On the other hand, MEP Astrid Lulling felt that “our ACP partners must understand that we cannot agree to remove all subsidies to our farmers, because that would mean running the risk of no longer being able to continue agriculture in Europe”. Abolishing subsidies “is not the magic panacea for all the world’s ills” and “all subsidies do not distort trade”, she added. In turn, the Green Group stressed that some developing countries had moved forward

to free trade and access to the market by using unsustainable production practices which were not in the interests of the majority of small farmers and the rural poor of the developing countries. The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) being negotiated between the EU and the ACP countries were also at the heart of the debate. In this regard, the Chairman of the ACP Council of Ministers pointed out that “EPAs must be instruments of development, not an end in themselves”. His view was close to that of Glenys Kinnock, whose opening address had expressed doubt that trade liberalisation would automatically generate growth and human development. Commissioner Poul Nielson noted the asymmetric nature of the EPAs, but said he was optimistic about the future. He reminded delegates that, despite the recent setback at Cancún, negotiations had opened between the EU and the regions of Central and West Africa. In the corridors after the meeting, several parliamentarians were looking on the bright side, maintaining that the trade debates had at least had the merit of “clarifying positions”. ACP Co-President Adrien Houngbedji was likewise optimistic, concluding “it was just a lost round”. ■

Parliamentary Women’s Forum: a plus for the JPA

With a view to improving their participation in the work of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, the women members have set up a new initiative: the Women’s Forum. It was instigated by Karin Junker, Member of the European Parliament, with the aim of creating a space for dialogue and discussion among the women members of the JPA.

The first meeting of the forum was in Brazzaville (Republic of Congo) on the occasion of the 5th session of the JPA in March 2003. They decided to make this meeting a regular event before each session of the JPA. Although initiated by women, the forum is open to participation from all sectors of the public, irrespective of gender. The objective is to gather as many views as possible on questions related to development cooperation and to make recommendations to the members of the JPA.

The second meeting of the Women’s Forum took place in the margins of the 6th JPA session. Subjects discussed were immigration and the situation of migrant women in the European Union. The women parliamentarians discussed immigration issues in general but gave priority to the situation of migrant women in Italy, a country which has been particularly affected by this problem for some years. The stream of migrants to the Italian coast, the traffic in women and their exploitation by prostitution rings, child beggars, illegal work, the situation of migrant women legally resident in Italy etc. were issues that fuelled the discussions at this forum. The women parliamentarians insisted that the JPA should produce a detailed report on immigration and requested better support for associations working in the field.

Kenneth Karl