

Economic Partnership Agreement negotiations – state of play

Negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the ACP and the European Community (EC) were opened on 27 September 2002 in Brussels. During the first 12 months, horizontal issues of general interest were addressed at an all-ACP-EC level. Numerous meetings at ambassadorial and technical level took place around groups of issues such as the development dimension of EPAs, market access, agriculture and fisheries, services, legal issues and trade-related areas. A meeting at ministerial level between the ACP and the EC on 2 October 2003 marked the transition from the first phase of all-ACP-EC negotiations to the second phase of regional negotiations.

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This ministerial meeting was chaired by Hon. Merafhe, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Botswana. Commissioners Lamy and Nielson represented the EC. In the meeting, both sides agreed that EPAs must be instruments for development, promoting sustainable development of ACP countries, their smooth and gradual integration into the global economy and eradication of poverty. Therefore, EPAs will take account of the specific economic, social, environmental and structural constraints of the ACP countries and regions concerned.

Furthermore, a joint report was adopted which referred to the areas of convergence and divergence of the discussions in the first phase. Areas of convergence are, for example:

- regional integration is of crucial importance as a step towards the development of the ACP countries;
- regarding market access, EPAs will foresee flexibility, asymmetry and the improvement of current market access for ACP countries under the Cotonou Agreement, while being WTO compatible;
- the coverage and the length of transitional periods will be defined in detail at regional level, taking account of the specificity of the regions concerned; appropriate safeguard measures will be important;
- as “behind the border issues” are often serious barriers to trade, EPA negotiations should cover these trade related issues (as foreseen in the Cotonou Agreement);
- EPAs need to be accompanied by appropriate development support measures;
- for the second phase, both sides will establish an all-ACP-EC Technical Monitoring Committee, to maintain transparency with regard to regional negotiations and to ensure a free flow of information between all parties;
- the Joint ACP-EC Ministerial Trade Committee will have the task of ensuring the overall coherence of the various regional negotiations.

Discussions on areas of divergence, such as the need for additional resources, will also continue. All the documents and further information are available on the following website: http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade/issues/bilateral/regions/acp/index_en.htm

Following the meeting in Brussels, Commissioners Lamy and Nielson travelled to Brazzaville, Congo, and Cotonou, Benin, to formally open EPA negotiations with Central (CEMAC + Sao Tomé and Príncipe) and West Africa

(ECOWAS + Mauritania) on 4 and 6 October respectively. In Central Africa, an agreement with the CEMAC Secretariat on the roadmap and structure of negotiations was reached. These documents have now to be endorsed by the CEMAC Council of Ministers at the end of November 2003. As regards West Africa, while views are converging on the negotiation structure and the timing for negotiation topics, the link between EPA negotiations and development support still needs further discussion.

The EU invited the negotiators of both regions, together with representatives of the private sector and civil society, to Brussels in November to participate in workshops on EU institutional structures, decision making processes, trade and development policies etc. These one-week events were appreciated by the participants as they provided first-hand information on the complex EU set-up and offered an opportunity to discuss trade and integration with Commission representatives from different services and with the ACP Secretariat. The workshops also provided a useful platform to exchange views on how to approach regional negotiations.

Also in November, two regional workshops with civil society representatives were organised in West Africa and the Caribbean to discuss the first findings of the Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) on EPA negotiations. Results will inform the final report of the first phase of this SIA (for more information see webpage: <http://www.sia-acp.org/>).

Regarding other ACP regions, a group of African countries has announced that it will negotiate an EPA with the EC. On 2 October the Secretary-General of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) transmitted the list of countries to the ACP Secretary-General and the Commission, and informed them that 17 countries from Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) had asked the COMESA Secretariat to be the lead regional organisation for providing technical back-up to the ESA negotiators. The region is now selecting the lead negotiators and preparing negotiating guidelines. In southern Africa, SADC has organised internal discussions on its position in regional EPA negotiations. As regards the Caribbean and the Pacific regions, both are currently preparing their positions and it is expected that they will come to a conclusion within the next months. ■

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