

*The View from Europe*  
*By David Jessop*

## Has the ACP group a future after Cotonou?

In 2020 the Cotonou Convention will expire. Then the trade, aid and development mechanism that links 79 nations in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (the ACP) to Europe may well come to end without any successor agreement being put in place.

How this has come about says as much about the way in which the world has changed since the Convention was agreed in 2000 as it does about thinking that seeks to keep in place a special arrangement that linked Europe to its former colonies, without recognising the need to demonstrate value and achievement.

The existing Convention is the successor to mechanisms stretching back to the Yaoundé Conventions of 1963 and 1969 and the Lomé Conventions I to IV that followed between 1975 and 2000, and may well be the last that seeks to bring together three geographically distant regions largely tied now by a common experience.

Recently, the German Development Institute, the Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, together with the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) published a paper 'Towards Renewal or Oblivion' which reviewed the prospects for continuing a single co-operation arrangement between Europe and the nations of the ACP.

The document adds to a number of studies and discussions that have taken place at many levels in the ACP and Europe, but crucially focusses on perceptions within the ACP.

It makes clear what has been apparent since the EU's decision to bring into being region-specific Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs); Europe prefers a regional approach to its external relations. The report highlights within this context, as the Caribbean already knows, the fact that the Pacific and Caribbean elements of the ACP are not seen in Europe's capitals as anywhere near as important as Africa, and in the case of the Pacific is largely considered a matter best left to the strategic interest of nations on the Pacific Rim.

It also makes clear as is apparent to anyone who discusses the issues with those in Brussels from the ACP, there is a disconnect between the enthusiasm that exists for the continuation of the agreement and the actual delivery of objectives.

The report's authors put this down to the fact that the delivery of the agreement is in effect outsourced to experts, is understood only by a select group of officials and representatives and has become arcane. In other words, it is neither understood nor considered relevant by those it is meant to benefit.

They also point to a number of other factors that challenge its continuation: the arrangements are seen as primarily related to development assistance; the ACP as a group have not had a significant influence on global governance, despite this being a widely held aspiration; there are other vehicles that ACP nations are involved in that have overlapping remits; the ACP member states have not demonstrated their interest by supporting its institutions and its decisions financially; and the prevailing sense that the aggressive way in which the EPA negotiations have been conducted by Europe has engendered a deep mistrust of the EU.

The study concludes that there are three options that the EU and the ACP might consider: regionalising Europe's relationship with the ACP, which is what will happen anyway if no successor to the Cotonou Convention is agreed; upgrading the existing Cotonou Convention in a way that reflects current realities, but with a lesser focus on development assistance; and ensuring that in any regional agreement as many aspects of Cotonou's key provisions are maintained.

The short and accessible study deserves a wider audience in the Caribbean than the select group of experts and officials which the study describes; not least because it points to the changed reality of the region's future relationship with Europe, and the Caribbean's failure in recent years, along with the rest of the ACP, to turn emotional solidarity to practical advantage.

There is also much that the report does not say about the ACP or what might happen to it without a successor to the Cotonou Convention.

In the Caribbean most stakeholders, and in particular the private sector, have lost interest in Cotonou or its possible successor, and there is virtually no debate in the media on the likelihood of Cotonou's demise, or on the future of the ACP relationship.

This is because the Caribbean's relationship with Europe has already been regionalised through the EPA's formalising of trade and development relations with CARIFORUM and the agreement of an overarching Caribbean-specific framework document setting out the nature of the future political, economic and relationship with Europe: the Joint Caribbean-EU Partnership Strategy.

In Europe itself, the sense is that the Member States including the EU's former colonial powers have moved on. Strategically Europe looks at the world in a different way. China, Venezuela, Brazil and others are recognised as playing a greater role in the region. The Caribbean, with the exception of Haiti, is considered, as it were, too wealthy in comparison to the poorest developing nations, and in future development assistance will only be provided on a regional basis in the areas of security, the environment and private sector led development.

Moreover, the absence of understanding amongst European electorates of the reasons for sustaining a privileged relationship with former colonies at a time of rising domestic concern about austerity and migration has changed the political dynamics in the relationship.

As a consequence, a Europe of 27 states, increasingly distracted by its own problems, has asked itself why should the parts of the ACP have any greater significance than say Central America, and seemingly, the answer at high policy levels is that it should not.

This is not to imply that Europe thinks that any ACP region does not matter, but from its perspective, now feels the utility of a single ACP group has much less relevance or attraction.

In many respects the ACP was a child of the cold war, reflecting a practical response to the desire of the West to ensure that the future development and political orientation of its existing and former colonies.

For the organisation to have a future it needs youth, vigour, new thinking and a *raison d'être* rather than the language of solidarity and process, no matter how important the ACP's shared history and experience has been.

Emotional solidarity between the ACP nations remain strong, but the facts suggest that the grouping may have an uncertain grip on the future if it cannot identify and promote to a changing Europe a clear reason why there should be a successor to the Cotonou Convention.

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