New book on ACP-EU partnership launched on ACP Group 42nd anniversary

By Klara Smitts, ACP-IDN

Brussels, 3 June 2017/ ACP-IDN/ ACP: The African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States commemorated ‘ACP Day' in Brussels on 2 June, reflecting on "development partnership" with the European Union (EU), which it described as "a multi-dimensional and transformative experience".

These issues were discussed in two panels. But in greater detail in the book – *The ACP Group and the EU Development Partnership: Beyond the North-South Debate*[^1] – was launched on the occasion. The book constitutes a systematic and critical assessment of the nature, evolution, and prospects of the development partnership between the 79-member African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group of states and the 28-member European Union (EU).

Like the authors in the book, two panels on June 2 examined the history of the ACP-EU partnership since 1975; the EU's relationship with the African, Caribbean, and Pacific regions individually; ACP experiences with economic partnership agreements with the EU; and new political issues, in particular, security, migration, and diasporas.

But as ACP Secretary General Dr. Patrick I. Gomes noted, though the past is worth reflecting on, it is important to set sights on the future of the Group, particularly as the Cotonou agreement - the legally binding treaty on which the ACP-EU framework is based - will expire in 2020. This raises questions of what the main topics and sticking points will be at the negotiations, which start next year.

A lot has changed in the global arena since the ACP Group was formed in 1975, with 46 initial member states. Now, in 2017 and with 79 member states, the ACP has to rethink some of the basic issues and its structure in a changing world. Challenges among others of climate change, trade and investment, Brexit, and migration need to be overcome in the new ACP-EU agreement.

This means re-evaluating the relationship between the EU and the ACP – especially in terms of balance, or who is the "driver" in the relationship. No consensus could be achieved. But there was an agreement that the answer does not lie in the old donor-recipient relationship.

"The ACP is at a crossroads", said Amb. Edwin Laurent of The Ramphal Institute. The 79 ACP countries can either "become a player of relevance or disappear into irrelevance". One of the big challenges for the ACP is dealing with the after-effects of the Brexit.
According to Laurent, the relationship between the ACP and the EU is going to be put under tremendous strain by the Brexit. In addition, there is a narrow window of opportunity for the ACP to negotiate with the United Kingdom before the negotiations with the European Union start; at which point the UK’s strained negotiation capacity will not leave room for any other issue. This includes crucially the question of how the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the ACP and the EU will be implemented in practice.

Another issue that will especially be high on the agenda for the EU is migration. Anna Knoll, head of the Migration Programme at the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), stated that a new agreement needs to “go beyond return and readmission” in order to see what the shared challenges are.

Migration does not only go towards Europe, but also the other way, as pointed out by a representative from Jamaica who commented on the effects of the brain drain from her country. Development must be part of the debate on migration, said Ambassador Kaire Mbuendor of Namibia. Old-fashioned donor-recipient relations will not solve the problems that Europe is concerned about.

Questions were raised over peace and security in the ACP, particularly on the African continent, and what – if any – the role of the EU should be. “Resolving whatever conflicts there are is critical if we are to fully launch ourselves onto the trajectory of growth and development in our countries,” stated Ambassador Baso Sangqu of South Africa.

However, Prof. Adekeye Adebajo, Director of the Institute of Pan-African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, was both sceptical and critical of the ability of the EU to contribute to this, pointing to the EU’s dubious peacekeeping missions on the continent.

Negotiations on the new EU-ACP agreement will certainly cover trade. Ambassador Samuel Outlule of Botswana pointed out that although the ACP countries have many resources, they have not been able to process these in their own countries. Too little progress has been made on investment, he noted. Therefore, one of the roles of the ACP should be to promote intra-ACP trade and investment.

According to Laurent, regionalism could be a danger to the ACP grouping. The ACP can remain and indeed grow as an effective international partner, he said, adding: “It is what you do that is going to determine whether the times that we are moving through now will be a transformation of the international architecture of the relations among countries.”

What does the EU want out of the new agreement? According to Klaus Rudischhauser, deputy Director General of DG Development and Cooperation of the European Commission, the EU prefers a single binding agreement built upon partnership and common understanding. He hopes that more progress can be made to a reach common ground before the official negotiation mandate is sent to the EU Member States in the next six months.

What the ACP wants out of a new agreement, as expressed by ACP Secretary General Gomes, is a cooperation that is not about aid, but financial cooperation, partnership and development. This includes knowledge and technology transfers and would also have a political pillar as a component. The agreement, therefore, will have to be multidimensional and transformative, and will benefit both parties in terms of economic development and political partnership.

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Photo (from left to right): Ambassador Samuel Outlule of Botswana; Professor Adekeye Adebajo of the University of Johannesburg, South Africa; Anna Knoll, Head of the ECDPM Migration Programme; ACP Secretary General Dr. Patrick I. Gomes; Klaus Rudischhauser, Deputy Director General of European Commission's DG DEVCO; Ambassador Edwin Laurent, Head of the Ramphal Institute; Ambassador Dr Kaire Mbuende of Namibia; Ambassador Baso Sangqu of South Africa. Credit: ACP.

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