

Welcome speech by the Secretary General at the opening of the 3rd Meeting of ACP Ministers of Culture, 17 October 2012

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Honourable Ministers; Your Excellencies; Our friends of the Press; Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the ACP Secretariat, and in my own name, I welcome you all to ACP House – your own house. This third meeting of the Ministers of Culture could not have come at a more opportune time.

We face a world in tumult; a world in which old ideologies have collapsed. This process has created a moral vacuum that is being filled, in some cases, by new forms of extremism and xenophobia. This is why the humanising influence of culture is more important than ever before. Your meeting also dovetails with the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development which took place in Brazil in June. The Rio Conference underlined the importance of culture and the ancient wisdom of indigenous communities in preserving the natural habitat and the integrity of the eco-system for present and future generations.

Happily for us, your meeting also coincides with the visit by three Heads of State from our ACP countries – quite unprecedented in the nearly forty years history of our organisation. This week we are being graced with the presence of H. E. President Ali Bongo ONDIMBA of Gabon; H. E. President Macky SALL of Senegal; and H. E. President Thomas YAYI BONI of Benin, who also as you may know, is the Chairman of the African Union. They have taken advantage of their presence in Brussels for the European Development Days to visit the Secretariat and to address our Committee of Ambassadors. We are indeed grateful that they have been able to spare time out of their very busy schedules to lend us the benefit of their wisdom and good counsel.

Honourable Ministers,

All of you here probably know more about culture than I do -- of how vital it is to nation building and the development process itself. Among the Yoruba of West Africa, there is a saying that, "However far a stream flows, it never forgets its origin". Our culture is the essence of who we are – our very identity.

Some people do make a distinction between national culture and world culture. I see no conflict between the two. I believe one can be true to one's culture while taking the best from world culture;. And I think the music of the distinguished Minister of Senegal Youssou Ndour makes this point. We can embrace modernisation while remaining true to the spirit which inspires our conscience and humanity.

I also see culture and development as Siamese twins. I daresay that without development there can be no culture; and without culture – in the real and authentic sense of the word – development will remain very much a pursuit of illusions.

Distinguished Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

While culture is a thing to be enjoyed and treasured, I need not remind us that, in our day and age, it also has to be a tool of development, a means to enhance human welfare. Our cultural industries must be geared towards boosting local economies, creating jobs and enhancing livelihoods. This dimension is crucially important not only for music and the artisanal sector but also for film and cinema. In line with the 2003 Dakar Plan of Action for the Promotion of ACP Cultures and Cultural Industries, and as stated in the 2004 Maputo Declaration by the Heads of State and Government, our artistes should be adequately empowered to make a decent living from their art.

The motto, "No Future Without Culture" was adopted within the framework of the ACP Culture Programme under the 10th European Development Fund. This further underlines the importance of culture – its centrality to the development process. The sum of €30 million Euro from the European Commission has been committed to supporting the ACP Culture-Plus Programme in the areas of cinema, audiovisual productions and other cultural sectors. A Call for Proposals was launched last September, with projects expected to be submitted to the ACP Secretariat by 20th December 2012. We cannot over-emphasise the importance of this programme for bringing greater visibility to our artistes and cultural producers. We therefore urge you to kindly put your political weight behind this project and to give it as much publicity as you can.

During the coming year, we will also be working on a successor to the EDF-10. The 11th EDF will cover the period from 2014 to 2020. As you are probably aware, the Commission has proposed a ballpark figure of EUR €32 billion to cover the next seven-year financing cycle. As stakeholders on the cultural aspects of development, we will need your input in the financial programming process so that culture will be accorded its rightful place in the next financing cycle. That is, in the national indicative projects, the regional indicative projects, and of course you can expect the same at the All-ACP level. You as ministers need to be vigilant to ensure that your national indicative projects contain a cultural dimension.

Your Excellencies,

I would like to use this opportunity to remind you of the 7th Summit of ACP Heads of State and Government which comes up in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, during 13-14 December, 2012. The Summit will be held under the theme: "The Future of the ACP Group in a Changing World: Challenges and Opportunities". This summit will prove to be of historic importance to the future of our organisation as we consolidate on our achievements while mapping a path towards the future. The Resolution that your meeting will be adopting will also be tabled before the Council of Ministers in Malabo. We also hope that you will make a significant input in this historic meeting, while using your good offices to prevail on our leaders to make a strong showing at the upcoming Summit in Malabo.

Honourable Ministers,

Time and again, the ACP has been dismissed as a post-colonial contraption that has no place in the world of the 21st century. Well, I have bad news for the cynics. Not only will we survive; we will grow from strength to strength. We will prevail. We will prevail not because we lay claim to perfection but because of our deepest convictions about the rights of small nations and the power that lies in our unity and solidarity.

While the ACP will continue to need Europe as a predictable source of much-needed official development assistance, Europe will continue to need our natural resources and our markets. So this partnership is a mutually beneficial relationship.

In an era characterised by the so-called 'clash of civilisations', ACP-EU cooperation symbolises that dialogue of civilisations that is so crucial to the survival of humanity on our planet.

Distinguished Ministers,

The ACP comprises 79 member countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the islands of the Pacific. It is the largest trans-hemispheric intergovernmental organisation of developing countries in the international system.

We are united together not only by the bonds of history but also by the ties of solidarity and the timeless values of peace, dialogue, interdependence and international social justice. According to a West African wisdom saying, "It is fear of what tomorrow may bring that makes the tortoise to carry his house along with him wherever he goes". To ensure that we build a stronger tomorrow for our people, we initiated the Working Group on Future Perspectives which has been working assiduously to redefine our vision, reform our institutions and ensuring our effectiveness as an intergovernmental body.

One of the recommendations made by the Working Group relates to the design of a flag and composition of an anthem to enhance our identity and distinctiveness as a Group. Several designs are under consideration while a contest has been launched for submissions of anthem compositions from artistes in our member states.

Honourable Ministers,

In concluding my remarks, let me reiterate that culture is the bedrock of human development and, indeed, of civilisation itself. We at the Secretariat will continue to support the culture agenda as a tool of development. Under my watch, we would do our utmost to serve our high political Authorities and indeed all of our key stakeholders within the ACP family of nations – including our Ministers of Culture. No doubt, tough challenges lie ahead, not least among them being the relatively small operational budget with which we have to carry out so many ambitious undertakings. As Secretary-General and servant of your organisation, be rest assured that we would leave no stone unturned to meet your expectations and to serve the needs of our

930 million people.

On my part, I trust I can count on your continuing support so that, together, we can build an intergovernmental community that serves as an agent of global influence and an increasingly credible actor in international economic relations – an organisation worthy of our Founding Fathers and the noblest ideals of civilisation that inspired us to embark upon this heroic course.

Once again, I welcome you very warmly to ACP House – your own House, and I wish you very fruitful deliberations. Thank you for your kind attention.

Mohamed Ibn Chambas
ACP Secretary General

(Photo: Special cultural performance from Cameroun to welcome ACP Ministers)

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