

Keeping promises and meeting the EPA challenges: more political will needed

THE EPAS CAN ONLY BE MEANINGFUL if they are an extension of the development strategy of the countries and the region. By hurrying up, the negotiators are taking the risk of reaching agreements that do not reflect the realities and do not ensure adequate participation of the countries and stakeholders in such a way as to reflect their expectations.

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THE EPAs should create, including in the opinion of the European Commission, a trade and economic framework that is conducive to sustainable development and poverty reduction in each ACP country and region. The redefinition of the relationship with the EU is only one of the points of discussion. For an EPA to be able to provide new opportunities, it must be integrated in a clear development strategy and be based on an economic, institutional and structural transformation process at the service of the people, both at the national and regional level. Otherwise, the EPAs will not only not be able to keep their promises, but they could also cause a serious imbalance that will affect the development objectives of the ACP countries and region.

There is no linkage between national development strategy and EPAs. In the present stage of negotiations, the Economic Partnership Agreement between WA and the EU seems not yet to be incorporated in a clearly defined development and reform dynamic that would be owned by national stakeholders of the region. To many people, the risks associated with the EPAs are still not well defined. The solutions provided to the problems being raised by these people seem not to convince the private sector businessmen, representatives of the civil society or some ECOWAS Member States. Although negotiations are progressing the EPA, as formulated by the negotiators, is not really being appropriated at national level based on a long-term integrated development strategy. Most of the West African countries have not incorporated the EPAs into their national reform programmes. Whereas negotiators seem to be busy attending to the most urgent thing first – setting-up an EPA by the end of 2007 – one can observe, in many of the countries of the region, a dichotomy between the EPA adoption project (confined to the Ministries of

Trade and Finance for issues relating to the loss in customs earnings, and the Ministry of Agriculture for the identification of sensitive products) on the one hand, and the economic, social and reform policies meant, in principle, to ensure sustainable development at the national and regional levels, on the other hand.

Thus the current pace of negotiations does not in any way guarantee the involvement of a greater number of people in the negotiation or even their access to information. As of today, West Africa has not been able to propose an EPA text and seems unable to do so before the end of September or even October 2007. This further delays the negotiation schedule and contradicts the participation objectives set out in the Cotonou Agreement.

Setting a good agreement as the target, instead of reaching an agreement at all cost. In this context, the EU's strong desire to conclude an EPA with West Africa by the end of 2007 appears to be in contradiction with the economic and political realities of the region. By putting a lot of pressure on West Africa, the European Commission may likely be perceived as interventionist, using its political and economic power to impose its own vision in the negotiations. As such, it could be accused of practising “the stick-and-carrot” technique, by using aid promises and threat of loss of trade preferences, with a view “to buy” or obtain the conclusion of an EPA by “force” between now and the “fateful” date of 31 December 2007 at all cost.

However, this scenario could be replaced by a more balanced one. With enough political will, the European Commission and the EU member States could take advantage of the different options in order to continue the negotiations by taking into account the delays recorded and the real negotiation capacities in West Africa. In order to achieve this, the ACP negotiators

should be assured that the present trade would not be disrupted after 2007. This is only a matter of political will. It is important in this context for the EU to consider the difficulties encountered by the West Africa region and which have been emphasised in the mid-term review. These difficulties should, in particular, make it possible to redefine more coherent strategies. At the same time, it is crucial that leaders of the West African countries assume their responsibilities. They can do so primarily by clearly expressing as soon as possible their difficulties in concluding the EPA negotiations by the end of 2007¹, so that appropriate measures can be taken, including by European countries that support their approach. But above all, it is important for them to assume their political responsibilities by drawing up a coherent programme for the long-term development of their countries, in which an EPA whose content they might have defined themselves could be developed. Otherwise, the challenges for the implementation of an EPA could be insurmountable.

In the present stage of discussions, it seems difficult to think that the EPAs in their current form can satisfactorily meet the development and regional integration strengthening objectives set out in the road map drawn up in Accra by the two parties in 2004. Only a strong political will in Europe and in West Africa can ensure that the economic and trade cooperation framework between the two regions is consistent with the long-term development objectives for the benefit of the 240 million inhabitants of a region that is among the poorest in the world. ■

1. Thus, the mid-term review of the EPA concluded in May 2007 is a lost opportunity.