



Signed on 23 June 2000 and for 20 years, the Cotonou agreement is the latest version of the partnership agreement between the European Union and the ACP countries. Based on three pillars closely interdependent, political dialogue, trade relations and development cooperation, it continues the policies carried out since 1958 between the partners and governs the implementation of the European Development Fund. The agreement proposes a review every 5 years, which is not compulsory. Begun in April 2004, the changes requested by the Commission have accelerated.

To some, « Cotonou » accounts for advances: it advocates equality of partners, ownership of development strategies (by those receiving aid), the importance, and indeed the necessity, of participation, dialogue and mutual obligations, differentiation and regionalisation.

At the heart of, and the central declared objective of this partnership, is the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty, while contributing to sustainable development, a policy initiated by the United Nations and taken up by the European Union. In principle, the ACP countries determine the content of their own development policy. Governments are no longer the main actors: dialogue, programming and follow-up are open to others, such as civil society. But the agreement also foresees that cooperation will vary according to the level of development in a country, its needs, but above all, its performance. This last clause allows for the introduction of the necessary shifts/variations from one country to another and from one sector to another, according to the European internal agenda. The principle of competition and selection are largely applied.

One could ask oneself about the wisdom of embarking on a first review in 2004, before an analysis and an evaluation of the results of this cooperation had been carried out.

The negotiations on the review of the Agreement will end in February 2005. The proposed changes are major. In effect, they are in keeping with the redefinition of the European Union's development and external policies. It confirms the tendency to progressively and inescapably introduce conditions and unilateral flexibility into the partnership agreement.

Conditions to receiving aid are becoming more and more economic. Human rights and good governance are used politically and governments are pushed to relinquish their prerogatives in social and human matters by financial conditions. These last ones do not question the structural factors for impoverishment which, despite the declared intentions of the donors, continue to widen the gap between rich and poor.

The ACP group position is that the European Union's proposals strike at the very foundations of the agreement. Here are four important points raised:

- the European redefinition – and reduction - of the responsibilities of the national authorising officers and line Ministries in ACP weakens the ACP countries' position and the capacity of the partner state to be involved in programming, monitoring and implementation of what should be their "own" policies.
- an extra burden on the partner state is introduced through the place given in essential elements by the proliferation of *weapons of mass destruction* and their means of delivery as being the most serious threats to international stability and security. The priority for Europe is the international and multilateral agenda on the fight against terrorism.

Elements of the proposal are driven by **internal European demand on security**, and not by the fight against poverty, for which Europe has no legal obligation to effectively spend. The ACP group does not agree with the introduction of this provision as **an essential element of the Agreement**, because it might mean that aid can be suspended for not cooperating with the EU.

- despite the Agreement and the new proposal of the Commission, the real involvement of real local "Non State actors" remains un-enforced on the ground, as they are not involved in the development process nor in the Review of the agreement. For further involvement it seems to be that the provisions regarding eligibility and access to EDF resources are implemented.
- even though the political dialogue is one of the principles put forward by the Agreement, the ACP expresses its concerns in the face of the European unilateral position in the process and implementation. They proposes to take into account the position of the ACP group as a whole in the political dialogue (art.8 and 96/97) and also requests the enhancement of the role of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly in this dialogue. But the Union is blocking this first proposal. This leads us to reflect on the true political will of the Commission to respond to the concerns and specific needs of their partners, State or not.

The requests of the ACP are seen as concessions to be made, while the demands of the Union are presented as going without saying and non-negotiable, even though they contain the possibility in the future of cutting aid. Moreover, the review rests essentially on the aid part and not on the part concerning economic partnership agreements, negotiated separately with the Directorate General for Trade.

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