

**Interview:** Ingrid Kersjes, Policy Officer, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.  
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(Original Version)

**Grain de sel: How did the EU Member States get involved in the ACP-EU cooperation reform and what is the result of this involvement?**

Ingrid Kersjes: The Cotonou Partnership Agreement entailed a reform of the ACP-EU trade relationship (art. 37.1) by the end of 2007. The principal reason for this reform was the fact that WTO-regulation no longer accepts the unilateral preferences the EU grants to the ACP countries (waiver until 2007). Therefore reciprocal EPAs are being negotiated between the EU on the one hand and six blocks of ACP countries on the other hand.

The European member states are actively involved in this trade reform process as the special relationship with the ACP group is considered very important to most of them. This involvement is manifested on different levels: in Brussels the member states actively participate in the various working groups (not on Ministerial level) where EPAs are discussed with the European Commission. At the political level they are represented in the relevant Councils (Ministerial level) where decisions are taken about the mandate for the negotiations and the ultimate results. Along with other Member States the Netherlands emphasises the developmental character of the EPAs and pushed for example for a truly duty-free-quota-free offer from the EU to ACP imports, creating new export opportunities for the ACP countries.

The EPAs can be more than Free Trade Agreements on goods alone. Potentially, the agreements can cover liberalisation of services and different trade-related rules (investment protection, transparency in government procurement, trade facilitation and competition policy, the so called Singapore issues) as well. Such rules can help foster economic and private sector development in ACP countries. But limited ACP capacities for negotiating proper rules geared to their situation need to be taken into account. Negotiating these issues leads to 'mixed' agreements because of EU member states' competencies in these fields, requiring explicit member state involvement. This is also the case where EPA's have an obvious aid dimension.

The importance that member states attach to the negotiations is further shown by the occurrence of informal meetings by groups of interested member states to discuss issues related to the EPA-negotiations. This results in more efficient discussions in Brussels.

The actual EPA-negotiations are of course mainly conducted between the European Commission and the regional secretariats of EPA configurations. The member states are not present there but are informed about the proceedings of the negotiations on a regular basis by the Commission. Important is that we also receive information from our embassies in ACP countries. They provide us with their view on the progress of the negotiations, the position of the host country's government and the involvement of civil society in the EPA-process. Moreover, our embassies are involved in the linkage of trade engagements with aid programmes.

Since a year the member states are invited to join the Regional Preparatory Task Forces (RPTFs), the forum that exists in most EPA-regions where a link is established between what is negotiated on the trade side and what should accordingly happen in the accompanying measures on the aid side. Although the RPTFs are not fully operational in every region (yet),

it is a platform of exchange between the ACP, Commission and also EU member states allowing member states to take note of the capacity needs of the ACP in the trade area and to align their aid programme with that assessment. In the West-African region, for example, the Netherlands has financed a workshop on a scenario planning tool that can help the ECOWAS countries in making choices on their path to sustainable development.

**GDS: According to you, what were the founding principles of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement ? To what extent were they different from other existing cooperation agreements in the world?**

IK: The goals of the agreement are to foster economic, social and cultural development in the ACP countries, to enhance peace and security and to promote a stable and democratic political climate. Without going in depth into the five pillars of the CPA, the approach to achieve this is based on three features: politics, trade and development. The integration of these three features makes the CPA different from most other existing cooperation agreements in the world. Especially the European Development Fund is an instrument that is uniquely available for the ACP region.

**GDS: The Cotonou agreement was signed 7 years ago. What would you say about these principles 7 years after the signature?**

IK: More than ever these principles are still valid. To translate these principles into concrete actions and realize a truly coherent approach has proven to be a formidable challenge. But both EU member states and ACP countries have shown their commitment to give further substance to a special and innovative framework of cooperation.