Towards a More Synergistic Cooperation between the Caribbean and Africa within the OACP

By:

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The Caribbean and Africa are unique and similar in their pluri-ethnic composition and shared history. They may have more in common than any other geopolitical regions in the world. They have even more reason to strengthen and deepen political and cultural ties, not least because the Caribbean is historically a major location of the African diaspora, and much of Caribbean history is steeped in the African "soul" and culture. This should be seen as a central element in their global repositioning strategies, specifically within the context of the OACPs.

Superficial Solidarity among the OACPs?

The backdrop of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States' (OACPs), over 40 years of collaboration on trade and development in the framework of their cooperation with the European Union (EU), should have provided the Caribbean and Africa with a perfect platform for creating and building on internal alliances and affinities. However, this was hardly the case, despite the legendary solidarity forged during the group's negotiation of the first ever trade and development agreements between developing and developed countries – the Lomé Conventions spanning 1975-2000.

In succeeding years, with the joint negotiation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement and later the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA), the Group's focus on facilitating relations with the EU, and other challenges related to developing joint positions in the context of perceived heterogeneity of needs, did not engender purely African and Caribbean-focused cooperation. For example, some perceived the EPA's aim of deeper regionalization as fragmentation of the group and a missed opportunity to develop an active and specific trans-ACP cooperation model.

Between Trade and Good Intentions

The 1975 Georgetown Agreement, the ACP founding agreement, stipulated that strengthened solidarity was one of the group's objectives, as well as the "development of greater and closer trade, economic and cultural relations amongst the ACP States..." This would be accomplished mainly through the "exchange of information...in the fields of trade... and human resources". However, "exchange of information" alone is insufficient to unite two regions with more to offer in terms of strategic partnerships.

Trade was touted as a promising area of partnership between the Caribbean and Africa, which engaged in commercial activities side by side with Europe but hardly with each other. In 2012 the ACP Secretariat (now OACPS) commissioned a study on the feasibility of an all-ACP Free Trade Area to seize opportunities "arising from the dynamism of economic growth..., development of competitive niche productive capabilities and effective regional integration and intra-ACP cooperation."

The ITC conducted a study on the prospects for stronger performance and cooperation of the ACP Group. At that time, Africa's growth rate was considered

relatively good (4% compared to global 5-6% rate) while the Caribbean small states averaged 2%. One of the empirical conclusions of that report stated that "scaling up cooperation among ACP countries will lead to more trade... and boost economic growth." However, most of the analysis referred to intra-regional trade within each region and hardly across ACP regions. It was later posited that an all ACP FTA might not be feasible because of cost implications related mainly to transporting goods and possibly because of the export of similar products.

However, today, the diversity of global exchanges, the need for operational alliances of common understanding and the cultural and political adaptability of the Caribbean and Africa provide excellent conjunction of synergies required to reenergize discussions on their future trans-Atlantic cooperation. Though trade between the two regions should be encouraged, it should be only one among many other tools that could be used to bring realities that unite the Caribbean and Africa into focus. Further, the recently revised Georgetown agreement refocusing on areas of the group's strength could optimize opportunities to promote greater cooperation among its Caribbean and African member states.

Real Cooperation for Changing Times

Cooperation between the Caribbean and Africa, within the OACP setting, to be effective, has to be fueled by more than just an interest in jointly negotiating with the EU, but be fostered by a real understanding of each other's realities and challenges. Today, there is a plethora of areas for joint attention, from cultural synergies to blue economy to green sustainable pathways. Health crises, climate change, and digitization challenges are also emerging concerns of both regions. These could be tackled strategically, using the common platform of the OACP, in order to make the next decade a synergistic one.

The Caribbean, for its part, needs to be savvier and more driven by foresight to be able to make alliances with Africa work. That includes taking risks to engage more meaningfully with resource-rich, culturally talented and infrastructure-deficient Africa, which represents over 17% of the world's population and a market of 1.3bn people. Forty-nine (49) of its 54 Members are represented in the OACPs. And though the Caribbean is made up of small states, the opportunities it offers are numerous: 16 votes, increasing success in trade in

services, a vibrant and creative exported culture, a time-tested tourism-related brand and academia of repute. The Caribbean, made up primarily of the African diaspora, must position itself strategically and the OACPs as a sterling multilateral arena where they can pursue closer bilateral relations for meaningful cooperation while keeping the multilateral purpose of the institution on the radar.

The 2021 Leaders' Dialogue on the Africa Covid-Climate emergency confirmed areas of increasing interest to both regions: lowest emitters-greatest impacted; increased droughts; increasingly destructive wet-weather events; challenges with agricultural resilience; food security and supply chain issues. They also pledged to work with small island states to build resilience, and commit to investments that contribute to green recovery to align with the Paris Agreement. These are areas of dialogue that could raise the ambition of Africa-Caribbean collaboration in Brussels.

From an institutional perspective, the African Union, the African Development Bank and academic institutions can become important players in creating a real Caribbean-African space for cooperation. An admirable example of this is the OECS - African Union virtual meeting in April 2021 to discuss and strategize how to address the disparities and inequalities they face in obtaining adequate vaccine coverage for their populations. At that meeting, the appeal made by former President of Nigeria, H.E. Obasanjo, spoke volumes: It is only if we go together that we will be able to swim together. The University of the West Indies (UWI), in collaboration with African universities (Lagos, Johannesburg), has also spearheaded diaspora studies and global affairs initiatives. These should be built upon.

Investing in Synergies and Joint Strategies

In spite of prior-referenced efforts, relations between the Caribbean and Africa, including in Brussels, have been described as underinvested. The two regions have been deprived of a wealth of solidarity and functional cooperation opportunities including in the area of people-to-people cooperation, regional integration experience, free movement of persons and building innovative regional value-chain frameworks in comparative sectors, and fostering social links across virtual borders.

The political ground work for promoting stronger relations between the Caribbean and Africa has already begun but should be further catalyzed by the proximity afforded by the OACP Group. Jamaica and Barbados have diversified their bilateral partnerships and broadened the scope of engagement in countries such as Liberia, Togo, Ghana and Kenya. A few African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, have concretized their desire to promote diplomatic collaboration in the Caribbean. Such bilateral and regional representations should increase in the near future to respond to the desire for closer cooperation expressed by both regions during the 2019 visit of President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana to CARICOM. These wishes were also highlighted during the opening of the CARICOM office in Kenya in 2019.

The bilateral efforts that are being undertaken elsewhere (in the respective regions or at the UN through AfCAR) could be brought to bear to enrich the Caribbean and African diplomatic and political experience in Brussels, through, inter alia:

- A desire for outreach, intentional political linkages, via OACP institutions and also bilaterally;
- A willingness to speak the same language, whether it be linguistic or otherwise;
- Developing trust that will foster deeper sharing of knowledge, information and challenges and, in return, support; and
- Fostering people-to-people exchanges, including through joint cultural/creative events and in-country experiences.

Such strategic moves are essential to building up solid partnerships between the Caribbean and African countries in all configurations, but more so within the OACP group in Brussels, based on commonalities and aspirations that go beyond "historical necessity." These could be the basis of true Afro-Caribbean geopolitics - a veritable political and social trans-Atlantic community.

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