Comment by Prof. Melaku Desta on the Introduction to our "Symposium on ACP-EU Cooperation"

By:

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I read this contribution with great interest and learnt a lot from it. While agreeing with the author on many of the points she makes, I just wanted to add a couple of related points that, I hope, will give further context to the discussion. I found the author's reference to disruptions in "the Cotonou acquis" interesting. Seen over a slightly longer timeframe, a nice twist might be to look instead at the Lomé acquis and consider Cotonou as "the" disrupter – a disruptor of an acquis established over a series of conventions spanning over a quarter of a century before it (from Lomé I in 1975 to Lomé IV, which came to an end in 2000 when Cotonou entered into force). Because trade was central to the Lomé agreements, the Lomé acquis was by and large trade-specific, revolving around the principle of unilateral preferences given by the developed partners (Europe) for the developing ACP.

Cotonou came to disrupt that acquis in at least three ways. First, it abandoned the core principle of unilateral preferences in favour of reciprocity. Second, and more damaging, it jettisoned the issue of trade from its agenda, leaving it instead to economic partnership agreements (EPAs) that were to be negotiated at sub-regional rather than ACP level. The effect of this Cotonou decision in terms of the trade agenda was to effectively demolish the 79-country bloc and replace it with a patchwork of supposedly six sub-regional groupings. Thirdly, and finally, when all but one of the sub-regional groupings on the ACP side were unable to negotiate as cohesive units and reach EPAs at sub-regional level, the EU ended up signing interim EPAs with individual countries, thereby – in the case of Africa in particular – throwing a grenade onto the fledgling regional integration processes underway at the time.

From this, I am of the personal opinion that, at least for Africa, the only innovation today that can repair the damage inflicted on Africa by EPAs is a post-Cotonou arrangement that:

- builds an agenda to phase out all EPAs, interim or final, that have been concluded with countries/regions in Africa within a reasonably short transition period;
- builds a similar agenda to phase out all Euro-Mediterranean Agreements with North African countries so as to ensure Africa is able to speak as one and in one voice on issues of trade – Africa's most important agenda with its most important trading partner;
- enhances the ambition and substantive content of the EU-Africa compact so as to establish an Africa-EU free trade area over an agreed transition period; and
- ensures that whatever transitional arrangements are put in place in the meantime do not undermine the AfCFTA agenda of integrating the continent progressively towards a single market.

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