The Future ACP-EU Relationship: Whither CARIFORUM?

By:

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In 1973, the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) was created between several countries of the English-speaking Caribbean. With the intention of gaining greater international presence, CARICOM Members joined with countries of Africa and the Pacific to sign the Georgetown Agreement which heralded the formation of the ACP Group of States (ACP) in 1975. In 2000, a record was set when the CARICOM group along with the Dominican Republic signed the Cotonou Agreement with the European Union (EU). However, the foundation started to crack slightly since 2008, when the CARIFORUM grouping barrelled ahead of the other ACP regions and agreed to one of the first ever Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU.

Aware of the deficiencies with the CARIFORUM-EU EPA, the African countries remained cautious in their approach to enter into negotiations with the EU. Questions surround, why didn't the CARIFORUM group wait for us to engage the EU? No one really knows the answer to this question, but this author remains haunted by the words of Professor Meeks who argued in 2001 that "…the

countries of the Caribbean will either hang together or hang separately."

Some 11 years later, the CARIFORUM group is back negotiating with the EU but this time, through the gateway of the ACP. This time is different. Rather than separate agreements with the EU, the EU agreed to an umbrella agreement with regional chapters called protocols. As much as it embraces our diversity, there is an underlying feeling that we will continue to fight for what is best for our respective regions and not what is best for the collective good of the ACP. Only a few days ago, the CARIFORUM grouping met 'to identify our key priorities for inclusion in the Caribbean protocol'.

As we approach the expiration of the Cotonou Agreement in early 2020, the time is now for the Caribbean to enter into the negotiating arena with our loins girded with belts of truth about our reality. A reality that is characterized by simultaneous integration and fragmentation; a reality in which we are physically small but geopolitically large; a reality where our small size must be seen as buoyant, agile, proficient strength as we navigate the global arena. A reality where our mature and battered regional institutions must now be renovated and become fit for our future purposes.

In a comparison of the ACP and EU Mandates, the road ahead does not flow smoothly across the Oceans. The focus of the EU appears to be on equal trading partnerships to achieve common goals. On the other hand, the ACP's focus speaks to a development that is grounded in industrialization, investment, finance cooperation, innovation, remittances, technology, environmental sustainability, political dialogue, peace and security. Zeroing in on the Caribbean Partnership mandate as outlined by the EU, the focus surrounds our geographical, geopolitical, geo-economic dimensions as well as our insecurities to crime, violence and terrorism – all key indicators that are vital for foreign investment within our countries.

The European approach of entering into regional relations with countries at varying levels of development results in uneven partnerships, gains and implementation. This is simply unsustainable for the post-2020 Caribbean. The ACP must remember that we are more than trading partners. We must remember that as a collective unit, we can influence global multilateral

institutions. To that end, we must focus on building on our intra-regional dialogue and share knowledge and practices.

Both regional mandates speak to ideals that would assist in achieving the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and trade is the classic vehicle to arrive at this destination. However, this author wonders about our regional home-grown, CARICOM development plan called the Single Development Vision (2007). This vision was created to serve as the roadmap for regional decision-makers to proceed with the implementation of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). Thus, regional leaders should have borne the 2007 Vision in mind and devised ways and means to find points of intersections with the Agenda 2030, other Global priorities as well as with the Post-Cotonou Negotiations. This is the only way we can ensure the Caribbean region and all its people come out victorious. We need to take charge of where we want to go.

The voice of the average Caribbean citizen must be heard. The negotiators must know about the daily challenges faced by indigenous groups, the vulnerable, the youth and the civil society within the region. What do they expect from the agreement? Further, these negotiations demand intellectual leadership from our CARIFORUM scholars and practitioners.

The post Cotonou negotiations provide us with an opportunity to create a more responsive and reflective framework charged with reflecting our new realities, goals and circumstances. Regional priorities must first involve reasserting our independence and deepening the CSME; identifying the pitfalls of the EPA especially the supply side constraints that prevent us from penetrating the EU markets; south-south migration and mobility for our service professionals as well as building productive capacity within member states.

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