

African Economic and Political Integration and Alternatives to the EU-ACP Economic Partnership Agreements

A Policy and Research Meeting

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 9-11 June 2008

Concept Note

The two major challenges facing Africa today are the economic integration and political unification of the continent. On these challenges there is unanimity among Africans across the board, and Africans are speaking with one voice. Whatever disagreements there may be, they are about the modalities for effectively integrating the continent economically and unifying it politically, not about the importance of these issues, for the key to our collective freedom and dignity as a people and the development of our continent is in the economic integration and political unification of Africa.

The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)

The obstacles in the way to African unity and development are numerous. Over the past twelve months or so, huge pressure has been brought to bear on African governments to force them to sign Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the European Union (EU). The EPAs are a follow up to the ACP-EEC/EU Lome Conventions and the Cotonou Accord, and their main aim is to create a “free trade zone” covering Africa and Europe. Signing the EPAs would mean endorsing the “free trade zone” concept among partners with vastly unequal economic positions in the international system. The consequences for African economies are too many to contemplate. The likely consequences of the full exposure of African agriculture, industries and service sectors to competition from European firms are very serious.

The reasons why the African Union Commission, ECOWAS and many individual African governments, civil society and the business sector have been opposed to the EPAs include the following:

- The Lome Conventions and the Cotonou Accord signed between the ACP and EU countries have, over the years, yielded very limited benefits for the development of Africa; the EPAs are even less developmental in their design than the Lome Conventions and the Cotonou Accords were; they are therefore not likely to lead to an acceleration of Africa’s development process.
- After many years of forced structural adjustment at high cost but with limited positive outcomes, what Africa needs are certainly not EPAs that are meant to entrench neo-liberalism in Africa and jeopardise our continent’s agricultural and industrial development efforts by opening all sectors of these economies to severe and often unfair competition from Europe and elsewhere; Africa needs to find alternatives to neo-liberalism and a relationship with the Europe and other regions of the world that would favour the development of our economies and the freedom and well-being of our communities.

- The elimination of taxes on goods from the EU as is required by the EPAs will make African governments lose the 40% or so of their fiscal resources that currently come from taxes on trade.
- The EPAs are said to be approached in ways that would strengthen sub-regional and regional integration. In practice, the pressure that the EU is exerting on African countries in order to make them agree to signing the EPAs regardless of what the positions of the AU and the sub-regional organisations are makes it impossible for Africa to collectively explore alternatives to the EPAs.

There are a lot more reasons why African governments and governments of other regions of the South are extremely reluctant to sign trade agreements that force their markets open to competition from the much stronger economies of Europe. The fact of the matter is that the EPAs are designed to serve the EU's interest, particularly in the face of competition from China, India, the United States, and other global players, more than they would serve the interest of Africa.

Responses and Alternatives to the EPAs

For this reason, the EPAs that the EU is currently signing with a growing number of ACP countries have been seriously critiqued. The AU Commission and ECOWAS are both opposed to the EPAs. African business executives, organisations of workers and farmers, and other civil society organisations have also declared their opposition to the EPAs. Similar positions have been expressed in Asia and Latin America.

The position of the AU Commission, ECOWAS and the majority of African governments is, therefore, very courageous, and it is inline with what African civil society and the private sector of Africa have been calling for: putting a stop to the EPAs. African civil society is also supported in its opposition to the EPAs by international NGOs such as Oxfam and Action Aid. The questions are: how long can individual African countries, the AU Commission and the sub-regional organisations hold out? How will partly individualized EPAs, signed under extreme pressure, impact on African economies and African efforts at regional integration? What are the possible alternatives to the EPAs? How can we concretely move faster towards the realization of the pan African economic integration and political unification project? These are some of the questions that African intellectuals, top African statesmen and women, leading patriotic and pan African business executives, and civil society should together find answers to. *African intellectuals are invited to rise to the occasion and lead the formulation of collective responses to the challenges posed by the EPAs to the continent's development, integration and unity.*

Our collective responses to the EPAs must take several forms that would include a firm rebuttal of the EPAs based on solid scientific facts, as well as sound *counter proposals* for more socially inclusive and democratic development models within the continent, and more equitable and just relationships between Europe and Africa that would favour the economic and social development of Africa. The best definitive response to the EPAs and to all other neo-imperial projects aimed at subjugating Africa and thwarting our

development efforts, however, is the economic integration and political unification of Africa so as to pool our intellectual, human and other resources and strengths to address the problems of poverty and development, and assert the dignity and presence Africans in the world of the 21st century.

Meeting Objectives and Format

The main objective of the meeting is to frame a strong rebuttal of the EPAs, formulate counter-proposals to them, and adopt a common position in relation to the historic debates raging across the African continent and its Diasporas on the unification project in general, and a union government in particular. It will discuss the two main challenges for Africa today referred to above: Africa's economic integration and political unification, as well as the EPAs and the implications that signing them will have for African development. Beyond the EPAs, the meeting will seek to make a case for, and draw the outline of, a more socially inclusive and democratic development model for the continent, and propose more equitable and just relationships between Europe and Africa that would favour the economic and social development of Africa.

The meeting will be a **high level** gathering of 25 to 30 researchers, policy-makers, trade unionists and civil society, including leading scholars on the EPAs, trade and regional integration.

Themes

Themes to be discussed in the meeting of expert on the EPAs and African integration include the following:

1. Evolution of relationships between Africa and the Rest of the world : : Outline of an assessment and current challenges on the following plans:
 - a. Economic
 - b. Political
 - c. Cultural
2. Assessment of EU-ACP Agreements : : Lomé, Cotonou
3. The EPA :
 - a. Why the EPAs (rationale) ?
 - b. What is the problem with the EPAs ?
 - c. The sectors concerned: : agriculture, industry, services : état des lieux, local policies (national and regional levels), and alternatives (national and regional levels)
 - d. The response of regional and sub-regional organisations
4. Alternatives : What development for the renewal of Africa in the New Millenium?
 - a. The Great Debate on the Unification of Africa
 - b. Experiences : The great projects : The Lagos Action Plan, AAFSAD, NEPAD

- c. Regional institutions and policies
- d. Alternatives for the renewal of Africa.

Meeting Organisers

The meeting is organised by CODESRIA, in collaboration with the Commission of the African Union. The conclusions of the meeting will be discussed in a major conference of African intellectuals to be held later this year.