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**Revising “Cotonou” –  
nothing new under the sun?**

By Dr. Sven Grimm und Davina Makhan,  
German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik



## Revising “Cotonou” – nothing new under the sun?

*Bonn, 5 July 2010.* Many eyes were on the G8/G20 last week. A few days earlier, representatives from over half of the world’s countries met in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Despite the weight of their numbers, that gathering has gone relatively unnoticed beyond the specialists’ circle, to say the least. 79 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) and the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) plus the European Commission signed the revised content of and rules for their relations, written down in the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. The ACP-EU framework dates back to the early days of the EU and, as such, might be “old news”. But the second revision of the Cotonou Agreement deserves more attention than it was given.

The Agreement signed in Cotonou, Benin, is a cornerstone in the Union’s external relations and is about trade, aid and political dialogue between the EU and the ACP states. It was concluded in 2000 and is in force until 2020. During this time, regular reviews are meant to keep the relationship “up to date”. What needs to be clarified first is what can be expected from the review. Observers can assess a revision by taking a step back and think outside the box. This helps identify goals and visions. The relationship with the ACP is a testimony of the position that the EU has held in the world. It is also a testimony of its taking up an international role over the decades. The agreement is not an unqualified success story and has at best achieved mixed results, for instance with regard to the economic development it aspired to promote. With its roots in the EU’s colonial past, the relevance of the ACP as a group has been fundamentally questioned, repeatedly and increasingly so over the years. But it is also quite strongly fended for. Still, how to fit it with newer organisations such as the African Union, which has now become a partner to the ACP-EU relationship and has an overlapping membership with the ACP group?

The world hardly ever starts from scratch, and the fundamental discussion was not the task of the mid-term review. Besides, the Cotonou Agreement upholds surprisingly forerunner features. We speak of mutual accountability since the 2005 Declaration signed in Paris, France, on a reform agenda for development cooperation – Cotonou provides for a long-standing Joint Parliamentary Assembly. We speak of more political dialogue with developing countries – Cotonou provides for a structured procedure for political dialogue. In the world of real politics, it might actually be wiser to first think within the box to understand motivations and rationales and judge according to these. This might not be glamorous, but it is policy-relevant.

Much of the changes made seek to update the Agreement on new and emerging global challenges: climate change, peace and security, more coherent policies to serve the goal of development and sustainability (e.g. in fisheries), considering food security, framing aid for trade are among the issue areas that have been integrated or strengthened in the revised text. But beyond these adjustments, the revision of Cotonou may well have paved the way for a fundamentally new type of interaction between the EU and the ACP. Two key processes have been better streamlined: aid effectiveness and regional integration in the ACP.

First, on aid effectiveness: The current setting of international standards – enshrined in the Paris Declaration – was not yet around when Cotonou was concluded in 2000. Integrating the principles of the aid effectiveness agenda in Cotonou is thus classical and unexciting, yet it is a commendable updating. What it ultimately means is that the EU needs to restore its reputation and credibility as a valuable partner in development. Without illusions, however, it will be a long



and winding path. Capacities in partner countries to flag potential policy incoherence are limited and flexibility on EU side is needed to respond to individual cases. Strengthening parliaments of partner countries in this context is a good idea, despite the limited capacities of many of them. The involvement of representatives beyond government creates opportunities for the democratic societies to increase transparency and improve accountability. It is unfortunate, however, that the participation of, say, the Joint Parliamentary Assembly, was not yet practiced in the revision process.

The stronger focus on regional integration responds to stated priorities of many ACP countries where integration is seen as key to contribute to economic development and poverty alleviation. The AU and regional organisations in West and Eastern Africa, for instance, have made considerable progress in the last years that can be built upon and should be supported. But promoting regional integration can also become the EU's key distinctive feature in the ever more competitive world of partnerships (not to say donorship). Even when thinking within the box, there is some rattling from the outside that cannot be ignored. China is but the most obvious example in challenging the EU in its "comfort zone", not least in Africa. As a product of deeper integration, the EU has a clear comparative advantage in engaging with regions and has a long-standing – albeit not all-positive – experience in doing so. A more effective approach is needed, one that does not pre-empt initiatives by ACP states, but rather supports substantial and real integration where it can be found in Africa and elsewhere. Europe can support, not initiate integration.

Thinking about the future of the ACP-EU relationship was not yet the task of this revision. However, the picture in 2020 – when the Cotonou Agreement ends – is likely to be drastically different from today. ACP and EU negotiators must not wait too long in their long-term reflections: after the review is before the review. By the next revision of Cotonou in 2015 (and ideally even before), the roadmap for the post-2020 regime will need to be clear so as to allow for smooth transition into the next phase of ACP-EU partnership. And this means preparing either for a funeral and mourning period, or for a re-birth party.



Dr. Sven Grimm and Davina Makhan,  
German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).