

***Eurostep* Statement to the 27th Session of the ACP-EC Joint Council of Ministers in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic 28 June 2002**

The Cotonou Agreement, the framework for cooperation between the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP), identifies the overall objective of ACP-EC co-operation as poverty reduction in the ACP. It is now widely recognised that effective civil society participation is an important pre-condition for all co-operation strategies and policies aimed at poverty reduction.

In this regard, *Eurostep* greatly welcomes the decision to organise an informal meeting between the ACP-EC Joint Council of ministers, the decision making body on ACP-EC cooperation policies, and civil society. As a network of European NGOs, with partners in many of the ACP countries, we are monitoring ACP-EC Cooperation on its effective contribution to promotion of social investment, achieving the Millennium Development Goals and advancing poverty eradication in the ACP.

The Cotonou Agreement states that non-state actors, including civil society, should be informed and involved in cooperation policies and strategies between the official parties to the Agreement. Partly as a means of fulfilling this principle, both the EU and the ACP have agreed that civil society actors should be consulted and involved in the development of the ACP Country Support Strategies and in the programming of aid process, which encapsulates the development of almost all broad cooperation plans and programmes between the EU and individual ACP countries over a given period.

Eurostep believes that in order to ensure the effectiveness of the implementation of civil society participation in ACP-EC cooperation, including the programming process and wider cooperation, assessments and reviews will have to be made by the different actors involved in this process.

In a joint ACP-EU civil society initiative, *Eurostep* has collaborated with ACP civil society organisations to produce reports on civil society participation in the programming of aid process in five ACP countries – Benin, Cameroon, Uganda, Tanzania and the Dominican Republic.

The reports show clearly that attempts have been made by all parties concerned to involve civil society and other non-state actors in the programming process. However they also highlight several factors that have hampered effective engagement with civil society in the process. These factors can be summed up in the points below:

- **The short period set aside for consultation with civil society.**
The period of often only a few weeks that was foreseen for consultations with civil society has proven to be too short for any meaningful engagement.
- **The quality and timing of information sent to civil society about the process.**

Many civil society actors in ACP countries received information on the process of consultation only days before the consultations were set up. Furthermore the information that has been provided has often not been appropriate for many civil society actors who are new to the process of ACP-EC co-operation.

- **The limited range of civil society actors that were involved in the process.**
Consultations have largely been aimed at a select few large well-placed civil society organisations, while little attempt has been made to involve the smaller grassroots and/or remote civil society actors. Furthermore adequate use has not been made of the existing, but sometimes fledgling civil society networks, platforms and structures that aim to represent a wide range of civil society actors.
- **The lack of institutional mechanisms to facilitate this consultation process.**
Insufficient efforts have been made to establish mechanisms that would provide for a system of stable and sustained consultations for all the actors involved, and for joint work on inputting into drafting of the programmes following consultations.
- **Insufficient reporting back to civil society actors on the results of the consultations.**
Civil society actors involved in the consultation process have been little informed about the results of the consultations, and what subsequent decisions have been taken and documents produced by the official parties.

All these factors have led many civil society actors to believe that the consultations exercise as practiced to date has not led to any meaningful engagement with civil society.

The 27th ACP-EC Council of Ministers meeting in Punta Cana has a real opportunity to address these problems. Ministers will be discussing how to operationalise the provisions on civil society participation in the Cotonou Agreement. This will involve the adoption of papers on *Eligibility Criteria For Non-State Actors Access to Funding Under the EDF*, and *Conclusions on the Participation of Non-State Actors in the Development Process*. An endorsement of the *ACP Civil Society Action Plan* put forward last July is also foreseen. The informal meeting between the ministers and civil society on the margins of the Council meeting provides further opportunity to develop and sharpen the proposals and ideas on the table.

As a contribution to the Joint Council discussions on civil society participation, *Eurostep* would like to put forward the following recommendations, which we believe are crucial to successful involvement of civil society in the next stages of the programming of aid process and wider ACP-EC cooperation.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ACP-EC CO-OPERATION

- Mechanisms need to be set up at the national, regional and all ACP-EC level that allow ACP and EU civil society to regularly, dialogue and exchange views and information with ACP and EU governmental actors on all aspects of ACP-EC cooperation. Certain experimental mechanisms have already been tried out which could be further developed.

- ⇒ Following the Conference on ACP-EU Civil Society Participation in July 2001 in Brussels¹, a limited number of dialogue sessions between ACP and EU civil servants and ACP and EU civil society representatives have been organised to follow up on the results of the Conference. These sessions have allowed civil society to input into the debate on the issues that will be discussed on civil society participation at the Joint Council. These dialogues sessions should be further developed and formally maintained.
- ⇒ The practice of holding informal meetings between the ACP-EC Joint Council of Ministers and civil society should be institutionalised for all future Joint Council meetings. The Cotonou Agreement specifically provides for such meetings between the Joint Council and civil society (Article 15 paragraph 3, third indent). Civil society should be involved in the planning and organisation of these meetings and funding should be provided for ACP civil society participation in these meetings.
- ⇒ The consultation mechanisms developed should allow civil society actors to dialogue with ACP and EU civil society actors on the forthcoming ACP-EC trade negotiations. This should involve regular and timely briefing and dialogue meetings at the ACP national and regional level as well as dialogue meetings, with EU officials involved in the negotiations, so as to ensure that ACP and EU citizens can fully contribute to the ACP-EC trade policies, which will impact on them.²

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROGRAMMING PROCESS

- The schedule of the review process for the programming of aid should clearly provide for adequate time for consultation with civil society. Ideally sustained consultations should be held with civil society over the entire period of the conceptualisation and drafting/reviewing of programmes.
- Information on the process and how civil society will be involved in the review of the programmes needs to be sent to civil society organisations well before the process begins. Information sent should take account of the fact that civil society is a new actor in ACP-EC co-operation process, and could include material such as information kits on ACP-EC cooperation.
- Concerted attempts need to be made to involve a wide range of civil society actors in the next steps of the programming of aid. Consultation meetings could be held outside capital cities to target the more remote organisations. Existing umbrella civil society structures that embrace a wide range of actors should be involved in the process. Where such

¹ *ACP-EU Conference on the Participation of Civil Society in the Implementation of Civil Society in the Implementation of the Cotonou Agreement* organised by the Belgian EU Presidency and the ACP Secretariat.

² The Cape Town Declaration adopted unanimously by the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly in March 2002 states that the “The process of negotiations should be open and transparent with concerned stakeholders throughout the ACP having access to all relevant information and data.”

http://www.europarl.eu.int/intcoop/acp/south_africa_2002/pdf/res_19_en.pdf

structures do not exist, support should be given to the development of such organisations in line with proposals made in the ACP Civil Society Action Plan.

- ACP and EU governmental actors should establish mechanisms that allow for a stable and predictable schedule of consultations with civil society over a period of time. These mechanisms should also allow for governments to work together with representatives of civil society, such as in joint government-civil society committees, to jointly input into the drafting of the programme.
- The system of consultations with civil society should allow for reporting back to civil society on the results of consultations and the provision of all relevant draft documents that have been prepared as a result of the consultations.

Eurostep firmly believes that the extent to which the abovementioned recommendations are followed will be a measure of the success in the implementation of the provisions on civil society participation in the Cotonou Agreement.

20 June 2002