

Welcome statement by the Secretary General at the Meeting of the ACP Senior Trade Officials and Technical Follow Up Group on EPA Negotiations and Implementation, 7 October 2013, Brussels

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Promote Permanent Secretaries and Directors-General of Ministries responsible for Trade Issues in ACP States; Excellency Ambassadors; Heads and Representatives of ACP regional integration organizations; Distinguished participants; Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you all to Brussels, Belgium, and to ACP House, your House, for this meeting of ACP Senior Trade Officials and Technical Follow-up Group on EPA negotiations and implementation.

I appreciate that most of you have come from afar; some having endured intricate flight connections, from the Pacific and Caribbean regions, and some parts of Africa. Your presence here today is a demonstration of the importance that your respective Governments and regional organizations attach to this meeting and, in particular, to ACP-EU trade relations.

Distinguished participants,

You have been called upon to attend today's meeting so that you can prepare for the ACP Ministerial Trade Committee scheduled to start on Wednesday, to be followed on Friday afternoon by the Joint ACP-EU Ministerial Trade Committee (JMTC).

The Secretariat, working closely with the ACP Subcommittee on Trade and the Committee of Ambassadors, and in consultation with the European Commission, has drawn up the agenda for the JMTC. We believe that the identified issues need to be addressed with the utmost urgency, since they are so critical to the good of our ACP-EU trade relations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

we believe that as technical experts responsible for trade in your respective Ministries and regional secretariats, your experience and knowledge will be displayed to not only enrich the agenda, if that is necessary, but also to come up with appropriate recommendations that will be submitted to Ministers. The ultimate objective of our meeting is three-fold:

First, to prepare the ACP Group's participation at the Ninth WTO Ministerial Conference to be held in Bali, Indonesia;

Second, to strengthen trade cooperation and partnership between the ACP Group of States and the European Union; and

Last, but certainly not the least, to examine how to enhance intra-ACP trade relations.

Starting with the preparations for the ACP Group's participation at the Ninth WTO Ministerial Conference, you are all aware that the meeting will take place in Bali, Indonesia from 3 – 6 December, this year.

I am informed that ACP Ambassadors in Geneva have put forward useful background documents for this meeting preparatory to the forthcoming Bali conference.

Two weeks ago (25 – 26 September 2013) in Geneva there was a brainstorming on the "Bali Agenda" and "Post-Bali Work Programme". We are therefore delighted that the ACP Geneva Ambassadors accepted our invitation to come and join us at this meeting so that they can lead us and guide us as we take up this point of our discussion today.

We are also hoping that the Ministerial discussion on this point will benefit from a panel debate involving a representative of the WTO Director-General and the Executive Director of South Centre, among others. It is expected that at the end of the Ministerial consideration of this item, an ACP Declaration or Communiqué, whichever is appropriate, expressing the ACP Group's interests, concerns and indeed the overall position on the WTO Conference, will be adopted.

I now turn to the EPA process in terms of the remaining aspects of the negotiations. Regional Economic Communities will be invited to provide information on how they have progressed so far. By sharing your experiences, including successes and shortcomings, we will come out the wiser in terms how we can take the agenda forward. More than anyone else, we earnestly desire to remove this thorn in our flesh, so that ACP-EU relations can enjoy a new lease of life.

With regard to the recent EU's amendment of the EC Market Access Regulation 1528/2007 which withdraws certain countries involved in the EPA process, as from 1 October 2014, your meeting will have to deliberate and recommend a strategy on the way forward for the affected countries.

I wish to reiterate that the ACP was rather dismayed by the unilateral action by our European Union partners on this matter. Although the setting up of the regulation was done by the EC, it was based on developments in the EPA negotiations involving both the ACP and EC Parties at the time. Thereafter, it became a joint issue and any amendment to it should have been agreed by the two Parties. What the ACP feared came to pass namely that the amendment to EC Market Access Regulation 1528/2007 has become the key complicating factor in the EPA negotiations.

Distinguished participants,

Other issues that you will consider relate to EC negotiations of FTAs with third countries. While the EC has provided brief updates on this issue during our various joint meetings, a key problem has been the inability to independently assess the impact of these new agreements on ACP-EU trade. Perhaps the situation will become clearer upon the commencement of the implementation of these agreements.

Another matter relates to actions by the European Union with regard to prohibitive non-tariff measures. We have witnessed a proliferation of EU regulations, legislative proposals and other measures that continue to impede ACP exports to Europe. Some of the measures related to sanitary and phytosanitary issues that you will have an opportunity to discuss are those that affect products of export interest to ACP States such as kava, cocoa, fisheries, and tobacco.

One other topic that calls for your urgent attention relates to so-called "conflict minerals". The EU has requested the inclusion of this point in order to make a presentation to the JMTC on an "EU initiative on responsible sourcing of minerals originating from conflict affected and high risk areas".

Finally, on how to enhance intra-ACP trade, I must say that it is disappointing that, on this point, not much has been done. There is definitely a lot we can do to expand trade among our regional communities. I invite you to exercise your minds on what needs to be done to increase and diversify intra-ACP trade. Your meeting will be most successful if you could come up with concrete proposals that we could present to our Honourable Ministers.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Without taking too much of your time, I want to once again welcome you and to wish you a successful meeting.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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