INTERVIEW: ACP could be future 'power broker' for developing countries - Prof. Mirjam Van Reisen

Brussels, 15 August 2013/ACP: Global politics has undergone major transformations over the past few decades, even arguably within the last several years. Meanwhile, the ACP is going through a period of 'self reflection' on how to reposition itself to be more effective on the global scene.

Looking towards the first strategic meeting of the ACP Eminent Persons Group scheduled next month, ACP Press sits down with international affairs expert Professor Mirjam van Reisen, Endowed Chair Marga Klompé at Tilburg University, whose study on the future perspectives of the ACP Group [1] last year has been a key contribution to discussions on the issue.

See also ACP enlists top expert to explore future prospects of Group [2]

ACP Press: Do you think such an alliance of 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries is relevant or useful in international affairs today? What kind of areas can it add value for its members, and for the rest of the world, which are not already covered by established organisations?

Mirjam van Reisen: [For the first question] Yes I think so. You see, international affairs is very layered. If you look at the EU we have the EU 28, then we have the Monetary Union, we have Schengen, etc. We have some member states who are members of the UN Security Council. We have members organised in different groupings in the World Bank etc. So international relations are inherently messy, in that they represent historic realities and they represent multi-layered interests.

If the EU has varied representations at so many levels why should other groupings be denied multiple representative fora? To me where efficiency comes in, is in the question whether the ACP Group can do something that other groups cannot do, or are not set up to do.

In my view, the ACP plays a pivotal role in bringing together a large group of developing countries, which are spread over three continents. They represent interests that are not just regionally defined but are defined by the nature of their level of development. This is not static, and I believe that the ACP has a tremendous capacity to grow in the coming decades, but at this point it represents these special development interests linked to the availability of natural resources, coupled with challenges of extreme poverty, inequalities and social challenges.

The ACP does not replace the African Union or the G77. With regards to the AU, the difference is that the ACP is not geographically defined and therefore it has a much greater potential to represent interests of developing countries at global level. With regards to the G77 - this group includes the BRICS, so it is often divided on development issues. Therefore, the ACP can play a constructive role to organise the representation of the developing countries within the context of the G77.

I see the future relevance of the ACP Group in really being a power broker for developing countries, working with BRICS, with Europe and with the international community on issues of common interest for the future of this planet.

ACPP: The ACP Group has been historically tied to Europe, but the EU seems to be increasingly expanding their horizons to other third countries, beyond the privileged focus on its long running relationship with the ACP over the years. In fact, the EU increasingly deals with ACP members on a bilateral or regional basis, and only call on the ACP Group as such in specific circumstances linked to the Cotonou Agreement. Is it safe to believe that the EU no longer needs the ACP as a group?
**MVR:** The mistake of the EU is that it believes that it can win greater concessions in bilateral negotiations. The EU is probably right on this one. But the mistake is that EU's long term interests are served by reliable and profound relations with a group of countries. Bilateral relations are inherently unstable. Collaboration between groups gives a much greater stability.

You see, the EU has always been vulnerable for its lack of natural resources. In the coming three decades we are also going to suffer from demographic effects, with double ageing (number and age) and reduced labour force. We are facing huge challenges within increased global competition.

So we really need stable friends. Friends are sustained based on mutual interests, on shared history and on tradition. The EU and the ACP have worked together since the EC's inception. It is to me obvious that the EU would be much weaker without its relationship with the ACP as a whole.

There is no regional partnership that can boast such institutional capacity and historic relationship with the EU.

**ACPP:** What would you say are the main achievements of the ACP-EU framework over the previous decades of cooperation and how can this inform/shape the future orientations of the ACP Group?

**MVR:** The United Nations High Level Panel (HLP) has very clearly set out the challenges up to 2030:

1. Leave no one behind
2. Put sustainable development at the core
3. Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth
4. Build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all; and
5. Forge a new global partnership

I see this conform with the ACP - EU partnership. The EU and the ACP have the global partnership that the HLP is recommending! Why would anyone want to abolish that to then build it up again? It will never happen.

The HLP provides an agenda that is universal and inclusive and which has the future of the planet at its core. This is right. It looks at how economies can adapt to these priorities and how natural resources become engines for development for all. It identifies how stable institutions can become the core of creating societies that are safe and which provide predictable environments for economic activity and growth.

It also says that we need each other to this in partnership, share markets, share innovation, share resources. I believe this agenda is right, and that the ACP - EU partnership should adopt it and provide leadership on this internationally. Such leadership can increase the visibility and leadership role of both the ACP and the EU and benefit both.

**ACPP:** In general, what key elements would it take to make an autonomous or independent ACP Group work? From your research, is it realistically feasible for such a group to exist? If so, what has prevented the Group from becoming autonomous/independent since its foundations in the 1975 Georgetown Agreement?

**MVR:** It is very feasible, it really just requires vision. The representations in Brussels are there, as well as in Geneva and in New York and in places such as Addis Ababa. It just requires really the wish to jointly give visibility and build platforms for sharing.

Today is a very different world. There is M-negotiation and twitter diplomacy; you don't need heavy offices to support a common objective.

I think what I found striking when I did my research on the future perspectives of the ACP is that the mandate of the ACP Group of Ambassadors has remained unchanged throughout all this time and has remained limited in scope to ACP - EU cooperation. This is the first thing that should be changed, as it is archaic and not adapted to current day reality. This group of ambassadors should concern itself with ACP interests in key areas, such as climate change and international development as well as trade.

I was also surprised to find the limited scope of the Secretary General. This a key asset of the ACP, its trump card if you like - but a leader is only worth as much as the confidence and trust it gets from those he represents.

I see a new generation coming up in ACP and in EU countries with totally different perspectives on international relations. They are simultaneously part of different worlds, they have studied together, they speak on Skype and Whatsapp, they play and speak on the internet across boundaries and continents, they share the same games and watch the same films, they travel and holiday together and they share common concerns around climate change, innovation and on the economy. This generation has a global outlook. Hence it is necessary to adapt the international structures that have historically proven to advance humanity to these realities of today.

Therefore both the ACP and the EU have to reinvent themselves and continue its longstanding relationship based within a new relevance that speaks to today's world.
**Prof. Mirjam van Reisen is an expert on international cooperation, the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Budget. She currently is the founding-director of the Brussels-based research and consultancy group Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA) and currently holds the Endowed Chair Marga Klompé on International Social Responsibility at Tilburg University (School of Humanities, Department of Culture) in the Netherlands. She is the author of *Window of Opportunity. The EU development policy after the Cold War* (2008: Africa World Press), which includes a section on the history of ACP – EU relations.

In 2012 Prof. van Reisen was commissioned by the ACP Group to conduct a UNDP-funded study on the future perspectives of the ACP. The executive summary of the report, can be downloaded here.[1]

- ACP Press

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