

# Speech: Co-President of the ACP-EU Council of Ministers, St Lucia Minister for Foreign Affairs, External trade and Civil Aviation, Hon. Alva Baptiste

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**Opening remarks by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Civil Aviation of St. Lucia at the Opening Ceremony of the ACP-EU Council of Ministers 14-15 June 2012, Port Vila Vanuatu**

Honourable Prime Minister of Vanuatu,  
Co-President,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Distinguished Colleagues,  
Your Excellencies Ambassadors and Plenipotentiaries,  
People and children of Vanuatu,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government and people of St Lucia and the Caribbean region, it is a privilege for me to welcome you all to the 37<sup>th</sup> session of the ACP-EU Council of Ministers. Meeting in this tropical paradise of Vanuatu – the Eternal Land – has been an inspiration in itself.

Over the last couple of days, we at the ACP have exchanged ideas, compared notes to re-strategize on future directions. Since our arrival on these warm and pleasant shores, we have been treated to such wonderful hospitality. I want to the Rt. Hon. Meltek Sato Kilman Lituvanu, Prime Minister, and the Government and people of Vanuatu for being such excellent hosts. Coming from the Caribbean, I can empathise with the challenges faced by the peoples of the Pacific Islands. We both face similar challenges deriving from geography and the constraints imposed by size and limited natural resources. Many of our citizens are poor and our governments struggle constantly to reconcile several competing needs in the face of limited public finances.

Despite all these constraints, a good number of our nations are registering noteworthy strides in economic development. Indeed, not too long ago, the people of these islands won the title of being “the happiest people on earth”. Everywhere around me, I see happy faces and gracious, warm-hearted people. In spite of all the odds, Vanuatu is making progress in infrastructure and social development – in governance and democratisation. Our partners in Europe – indeed all of us – have a duty to support these heroic efforts. We must transform the idiom of solidarity into meaningful action and tangible support to make a difference in the lives of ordinary people. This is the meaning and the true import of the historic partnership between Europe and the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific nations.

Your Excellencies, we meet at a rather sobering moment in international affairs. The global financial meltdown which broke out in Wall Street in the autumn of 2008 has continued to take its toll on rich and poor alike. In North America, Europe, and the rest of the advanced industrial economies, recovery has been at best, chequered. We are particularly concerned about the on-going Euro crisis and the unprecedented fiscal deficits afflicting Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Ireland. The impact is being felt in many of our ACP economies in terms of falling revenues from trade, investment and remittances and the dampening of business confidence in general.

It is our ardent hope that Europe’s leaders will act speedily to re-launch the engine of growth and restore much-needed confidence in such a time of crisis.

In our increasingly interdependent world, a prosperous Europe is in everyone's interests. For us in the ACP, it will be a boon to our primary commodity exports. A stronger and more prosperous Europe is in a better position to play its role as a stabilising influence in the world economy and a moderating voice in international relations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am particularly encouraged by the resilience of our own ACP countries in the face of rather difficult global conditions. Africa is forecast to grow at more than 5.4% during 2012, compared to a global average of 3.5% and an OECD average of 1.4%. The Caribbean region is forecast to grow moderately by 3.5% by year's end, while the Pacific Islands are expected to trail the 6% threshold.

While prudent macroeconomic management is bearing fruit in terms of increased growth and improved welfare, it is also sadly true that poverty is a nightmare that refuses to go away. The spectre of youth unemployment and the phenomenon of jobless growth remains a major challenge.

I am also happy to report that democracy is slowly but surely taking firm root in our national systems. In my own Caribbean region, democracy and the rule of law have become the norm rather than the exception. We have good reason to be optimistic about the prospects for Africa and the Pacific Islands. However, we cannot underestimate the challenges. The relapse into forcible seizure of power in Mali is a major cause for concern, in addition to the slow progress being made towards full restoration of democratic governance in Fiji and Madagascar.

I daresay that the attainment of liberty on an empty stomach will hold little or no meaning for the vast majority of our people. Our abiding challenge is therefore to reconcile the demands for freedom with the imperatives of welfare – generating jobs for millions of our teeming youths in the cities and in the villages. Equally crucial is confronting Climate Change and the risks posed by natural disasters and our vulnerability in international economic relations.

In this connection, we believe that our continuing engagement with Europe within the framework of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement is essential to ensuring our harmonious integration into the global economy and expanding the opportunities for growth and long-term sustainable development.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

As we meet during this 36<sup>th</sup> session of our Joint ACP-EU Council of Ministers, the profound changes taking place within Europe itself are not lost on us. We face a new Europe with a much expanded membership, differentiated institutional architecture and changing geopolitical priorities.

We in the ACP would be wrong to take our privileged partnership with the EU for granted – worse would be an entrenched 'entitlement mentality' that takes the continuing generosity of the Old Continent for granted. At the same time, it would be a great mistake on Europe's part to turn its back on an old and time-tested partnership. We are aware that there are some in New Europe who see the ACP-EU system as a relic of an old post-colonial order that no longer has a place in our new millennium. As we peer into the post-2020 world – when the Cotonou Agreement expires – we will have to think deeply about how our partnership can be re-engineered.

It seems clear to me that, in the coming years, we will have to make crucial choices regarding how to reinvent the ACP family of nations and how to broker a successor arrangement with the New Europe. Crucially important is the need to leverage on our strengths and reposition our organisation to meet the needs of a new century.

Honourable Ministers,

In the increasingly interdependent world in which we live, the ACP and the EU will continue to need each other. Like in all relationships, there will always be one or two sticky areas. One such is the slow progress in the finalisation of the EPAs with Africa and the Pacific. While urging our colleagues to speed up the process towards a final agreement, we appeal to our EU friends to show greater flexibility and understanding. Setting up arbitrary deadlines, in my view is not in the best spirit of our partnership.

Co-President,

After this week's meeting, some of us will be proceeding to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for the Rio +20 historic Conference. We at the ACP are anxious to speak with one voice and to agree a common position with our EU colleagues. For us, Rio will prove to be a historic summit. It will decide whether we can truly build a sustainable future for ourselves and our children – and whether this planet, which has served us so well, will survive and endure. Crucial to this agenda is the provision of the requisite resources to adequately address the order of magnitude of the challenge.

It is also vital that developing countries have access to the relevant technologies to build greener and more sustainable economies. We also insist that poverty should be at the heart of the sustainable development discourse, coming on the heels of the MDGs programme which ends in 2015. It is imperative that we reach common ground with our EU partners, so that together, we can help push the momentum for real change at Rio.

I trust that this 37<sup>th</sup> session will serve to bring us closer together on this and other issues I wish us all very successful deliberations. Thank you for your kind attention.

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