

Statement by the Secretary General at the 20th Meeting of the ACP Ministerial Trade Committee, 18 October 2017, Brussels

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- Vice President and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana
- Distinguished Honourable Ministers
- Our Special Guests Ambassador Roberto Azevedo, Director General of the WTO; and Ambassador Susana MALCORRA, Former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chairperson of the Eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference
- Permanent Secretaries and Directors-General of Ministries responsible for Trade matters
- Ambassador Albert MUCHANGA, Africa Union Commissioner for Trade and Industry, Ms Paulina Elago, Executive Secretary of SACU,
- Excellency Ambassadors, Distinguished Participants,
- Dear Friends

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all warmly to ACP House, your house, for the two meetings that are ahead of you – namely the 20th ACP Ministerial Trade Committee and the 15th Joint ACP-EU Ministerial Trade Committee.

I am pleased that many Ministers and very senior officials responsible for trade issues, in our ACP States and regional secretariats, have been able to come to Brussels to participate in these meetings.

Your presence here despite your respective busy schedules, and for some of you, arduous travel connections, is a welcome demonstration of the seriousness and importance that your countries attach to ACP issues in general, and trade in particular. For this, I want to reassure you, once again, of the continued commitment of the Secretariat, to support and serve you diligently. Our ultimate objective is to ensure that the work we accomplish is for benefit of the ACP peoples.

Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests

The purpose of your meeting here today and tomorrow is to prepare for the ACP-EU Joint Ministerial Trade Committee (JMTC), which statutorily is required to meet at least once a year.

The JMTC which is an apex policy organ within the Cotonou partnership Agreement structures, is duly mandated to address any trade related issues of concern or interest to the ACP States, including, most importantly, the monitoring of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). The JMTC's role is to address trade issues, and resolve those that pose problems.

The 15th Meeting of the JMTC, which will take place at Centre Borchette on Friday morning, will consider issues related to ACP-EU trade relations. These include progress on the negotiations and implementation of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), as well as other pertinent issues arising from the current ACP-EU trade arrangements. As ACP States and regions forge ahead with implementation of their respective EPAs, they are facing challenges and most are not deriving the expected benefits. However, open and frank dialogue can result in mutual understanding, and assist in surmounting the challenges faced. In this regard, the importance of the JMTC cannot be over-emphasised.

The Senior Trade Officials from capitals, representatives of ACP regional organizations and a selected Group of ACP Geneva Ambassadors met here for the last three days. They have worked hard to prepare for your meeting by developing useful technical material for your consideration. This includes recommendations that you could use when you meet with your European Partners.

Honourable Ministers

We are well aware that the economic growth and development of our states is heavily dependent upon their enhanced, effective and more qualitative integration into the global trading system. This is a formidable challenge against the backdrop of the current marginalization of ACP States in the global trade. Most ACP States are also faced with inherent structural and infrastructural constraints. The majority depend on commodity exports, single commodity some cases, to traditional trading partners. At the same time, the development promise and new trade opportunities of WTO Doha Round has dissipated with uncertainties unfolding from the EPA implementation.

These are challenges we must urgently confront in view of the presence of rapidly growing population which must be catered for and the need to accelerate progress in achieving the post 2015 sustainable development goals.

ACP States need to continually innovate and to adapt strategies, policies and measures to capture a larger share of global trade, with the aim of fostering sustained and sustainable economic growth and development, employment creation and poverty alleviation.

There are opportunities that could be seized, arising from the dynamism of economic growth in emerging economies and South-South trade, potential benefits from some services sectors, development of competitive niche productive capabilities, and effective regional integration and intra-ACP cooperation.

An intra-ACP trade framework has been under consideration by ACP States on various occasions. However, doubts have persisted about how far the conclusion of a free trade agreement would actually succeed in promoting intra-ACP trade, taking into account existing structural and competitiveness constraints, as well the fact that all ACP States have already entered into a range of bilateral, regional and multilateral free trade or economic integration agreements and/or negotiations that is consuming their limited human and financial resources.

In this regard, the ACP requested UNCTAD to assist in carrying out a "Study on the establishment of an intra-ACP framework for enhancement of trade and economic cooperation, starting with a mapping of intra-ACP trade opportunities.

The UNCTAD representatives presented the outcome of their work to Senior Officials. Although further work is required, I am happy to note that the Senior Officials have, in line with the thinking of the Secretariat, recommended the setting up of an ACP wide trade portal for access and use by ACP nationals and business. The trade portal will cover manufactures, commodities, services, investment and economic good practices.

Honourable Ministers

In the area of Economic Partnership Agreements, the Senior Officials received reports from the regional EPA configurations on the progress made in the EPA process. I note some progress but challenges remain.

We welcome Samoa and Solomon Islands expressed intention to accede to the EU-PACIFIC EPA arrangement thereby joining Papua New Guinea and Fiji, which are the only countries in the region currently applying the EPA.

The CARIFORUM-EU EPA celebrated its 9th Anniversary on 15 October 2017. The Caribbean region is advancing with implementation, albeit with some challenges. The ratification has progressed but still not yet completed by all countries, on both sides. Similarly, tariff reduction is progressing steadily. Unfortunately EPAs has not brought anticipated benefits to a number of countries. Some cite revenue loss and problems related to market presence even after gaining market access.

In the East Africa Region, consultations have taken place at the highest level between the region and the European Commission with a view to resolving the problem of bringing into force the regional EPA.

In the SADC EPA region, the implementation is proceeding with the setting up of relevant institutional structures. The EU is conducting an outreach mission to the civil society in the region and EC Commissioner for Trade travelled to South Africa early this week for this purpose.

In the ESA region, the sixth EPA Committee involving the EU and the four countries that are currently implementing an interim EPA met early in October to address issues for both sides. They have agreed to deepen and widen their EPA by jointly defining the scope and objectives based on proposals from either side. We congratulate Comores which signed the agreement in June this year.

For other members of the ESA region, the European side holds the view that the time for negotiations is over and that the time has come to implement the Agreements that have already been concluded.

Countries in the Central African region have received the same message from the EU. They are being encouraged to join the only existing EU-Cameroon EPA.

In West Africa region, a positive development is that in May this year, Mauritania concluded an Association Agreement to define the country's participation in the ECOWAS trade policy including the EPA. We are informed that Gambia is taking steps to sign the regional EPA.

From the above, we see a key challenge being the undermining of cohesive integration arising from the existence of different trade regimes within the same regional economic community. Therefore, there is need to conduct concrete analysis of the result, effect and impact of EPAs, on trade and regional integration as well as on its consequences to the development of ACP States. I am advised that Senior Officials have also recommended that such a study be carried out.

This is necessary as we look to the future of the ACP-EU partnership, particularly also because BREXIT would have an impact on EPAs for some countries, as the United Kingdom is a significant market, for these countries.

Honourable Ministers,

You will also be called upon to address the issues before the multilateral trading system of the World Trade Organization, and to adopt a Declaration on the Eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference that will be held in Buenos Aires, Argentina from 10 – 13 December this year. We are aware that preparations for the Conference have been fraught with difficulties related to the level of ambition and nature on the results.

I note with concern the changing dynamics in the WTO negotiations that undoubtedly are making the achievement of development-oriented results difficult. We currently stand on shifting sand. If the truth be told, recalling where we started from in Doha and where we are now in 2017, we are so far off course one could be forgiven for thinking that our compass must be broken.

Even the language of the negotiations is shifting: from the days of abounding hope for success when we talked about “low-hanging fruit” and “early harvests,” we are now into leaner times of “small packages”, “deliverables” and “outcomes.” One wonders how much more a reflection of barren times the language will evolve into. Even the Ministerial Declarations are getting leaner and shorter, not because Members have reached agreement on the outstanding issues but because reaching agreement is becoming harder. We all know how the passage of time benefits a wine with better taste. However, in the WTO it seems the passage of time hardens positions, making agreement almost impossible.

Recent pronouncements by some major global trade players and the realignments of international trade partnerships are causing consternation within the ACP Group. The risk of further marginalization is real. The ACP Group supports multilateralism that has a space on the table for small, weak and vulnerable economies, as opposed to unilateralism and protectionism which operates to the detriment of development for the economically fragile countries. The ACP group needs to secure language of commitment, reaffirmation and agreement to multilateral negotiations. That is the only way that ACP States can be integrated into the multilateral trading system.

The ACP and the EU intend to send a clear message of solidarity in support of multilateralism. In this regard, the JMTC will be invited to issue an appropriate message at the end of its meeting.

Honourable Ministers,

The other subject areas that your meeting will cover include the implementation of a new approach to commodities, ACP-EU trade regime issues such as the state of play on the BREXIT process, non-tariff measures, commodities and fisheries, EU negotiations with third parties at a bilateral level and mini-lateral level on Trade in Services (TISA). The agenda also includes the European Commission proposal to open negotiations on a multilateral Investment Court.

On all these topics, the Senior Officials report is rich with recommendations which you will be invited to deliberate on and come up with appropriate conclusions.

To conclude, permit me to sincerely thank our two special guests Ambassador Roberto Azevedo, Director General of the WTO and Ambassador Susana MALCORRA, Chairperson of the Eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference. We thank them most sincerely for taking time out of their extremely busy schedules to come and brief us and exchange views with us on the WTO MC 11.

With these remarks, I thank you once again for your presence and I wish you a very successful meeting.

Patrick I. Gomes
ACP Secretary General

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