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A stalled partnership

The EU wants to reorganise its relationship with 79 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. The problem: not all want to join in

The old model of aid has proven to be inadequate — this realisation shaped the preparation and negotiations of the so-called Samoa Agreement, which will be the overarching framework for the European Union's relations with the 79 countries of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) starting 1 January 2024. It follows on from the Cotonou Agreement of 2000 and was signed on 15 November 2023. Will the EU dare move towards a new model of external relations? The Europeans' focus on the war in Ukraine and then their voting behaviour in the United Nations on resolutions targeting urgent problems in the Global South have recently been counterproductive on the geopolitical level.

The post-Cotonou negotiations began in 2018, two years before the agreement expired in 2020. Since then, the signs have pointed to a polycrisis — not a good moment for negotiations, even if they were quickly moved into virtual space 'thanks to modern technology' and formally concluded in April 2021. The important issue at that time was the integration of the European Development Fund, up until then the European Union's main instrument for development cooperation financed by membership contributions, into the EU's general budget for 2021 to 2027. Within the framework of the EU budget, Brussels is now financing development programmes through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). The long break between the outcome of the negotiations and the signing is attributed to blockades over the EU budget by Hungary and Poland, which had nothing to do with the agreement itself. Either way, neither side seemed to be in a hurry.

Changing contexts and potential challenges

The Samoa Agreement provides a common basis that applies to all

contracting parties, as well as three regional protocols with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Initially, however, contradictory signals are weakening the EU's new partnership with Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific: only 43 of the 79 countries were prepared to sign the agreement in Apia on 15 November 2023. For some countries, this may be due to ongoing debates questioning legal requirements and demands of the agreement, which allegedly conflict with traditional cultural values. Other countries have argued for prior parliamentary approval — which could have been initiated in the meantime.

Since then, Georges Rebelo Chikoti, the Secretary-General of the OACPS has been diligently working to ensure that the member states that have not yet signed the Samoa Agreement do so before the end of the year. His efforts have paid off: within a month, a further 15 countries signed. At the moment, 21 countries have not done so, including some highly populated nations that are important for the EU's strategic partnership, such as Nigeria and Benin, in whose capital Cotonou the previous agreement was signed.

The Cotonou Agreement consisted of three pillars: development cooperation, economic and trade cooperation, as well as a political dimension. The latter in particular – through the Joint Parliamentary Assembly made up of representatives of the EU and the OACPS states – was a highly valued instrument for the EU to communicate its values and promote democratic processes. In addition to the Annual Parliamentary Assembly, the new agreement creates three new Regional Parliamentary Assemblies, strengthening the parliamentary dimension in the interests of progressive forces.

In view of global upheavals and trends, the EU's cooperation with the OACPS countries has also changed.

In recent decades, the promotion of democracy and human rights has been one of the most important issues in relations between the EU and OACPS countries. However, conditionality is effective only if it is applied consistently by the EU. This has not always been the case, and the approach poses major challenges, not least for the EU itself. When it comes to suspending aid in the face of human rights violations, undemocratic elections and military coups, the elephant in the room are the 'new donors' who provide aid 'unconditionally': namely, China, the Arab Gulf states and Russia. Another uncomfortable change could be that post-Cotonou, non-state actors are to take part in the partnership dialogue, as the EU attaches

essential importance to broad democratic participation in the design and implementation of development processes.

In terms of trade cooperation, between 2009 and 2018 the EU concluded a series of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the 79 OACPS countries, divided into six different regions, most of which do not correspond to existing regional organisations. The EU was perceived as being confrontational in the negotiations. As a result, many OACPS countries feared that the EPA would contradict their own regional integration or take away their control over their own integration processes. This argument can be found, among others, in analyses of or positions taken by countries such as Uganda and Nigeria, which rejected the Samoa Agreement.

In view of global upheavals and trends, the EU's cooperation with the OACPS countries has also changed. Today, issues such as access to climate financing and debt relief are playing a role. How can the EU be a credible actor if it is unable to deliver on its international promises, for example on climate justice?

The question arises as to why the two and a half years that elapsed between the conclusion of the contract and its signing were not used to address concerns.

In mid-December 2023, the EU agreed on its 2024 budget and increased the budget for humanitarian aid. This is a good sign for joint action and support for a global framework for action, since development cooperation is part of much broader debates on international relations and spheres of influence. Measures for greater coherence, such as the establishment of the European External Action Service and the 'Team Europe' label created during the pandemic to mobilise rapid help, are strong signals.

For the EU, the Samoa Agreement is a milestone of cooperative action within the framework of regional partnerships that are based on the shared values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law and which also promote multilateral cooperation to solve global problems. The EU's press release on the signing of the Samoa Agreement makes this clear: 'The 27 EU Member States and the 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries together represent … more than half of the seats at the United Nations.' One catch, however, is that some of these countries have not yet signed.

The EU is confident that sooner or later the sceptics will support the

agreement. The question arises as to why the two and a half years that elapsed between the conclusion of the contract and its signing were not used to address concerns. The partnership appears to have stalled. In the end, the EU does have an important communication channel at its disposal, even if at the moment it is weaker than intended.



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