

CARIBBEAN-POLITICS-EU says it wants to revisit relationship with ACP grouping

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By Marie Claire Williams BRUSSELS, Belgium, Jun 2, CMC – The European Union (EU) says it is time to revisit its relationship with the member countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group which is now observing its 40th anniversary this year.

EU spokesperson on Development and Humanitarian Aid, Alexandre Polack, acknowledged the ‘unique’ partnership between the EU’s 28 members and the 79 countries within the ACP as one which “has brought a lot of results”, and pointed to achievements through its development cooperation, in the areas of education, sanitation, among others.

But he told the Caribbean Media Corporation (CMC) that the way forward is through partnerships, rather than the

provision of aid.

He said the ACP has done to development regional integration noting “if you take Africa,(there’s) the African Union and then CARICOM and the CARIFORUM for the Caribbean...

“So we believe that we have to work more towards partnerships where we don’t only discuss donor-recipient so it’s about aid coming from Europe to ACP countries, but it’s about more us discussing together how we trade together, discussing political issues, discussing security,” Polack told CMC.

“And I think that’s the path it’s going to take, we tend to do a lot more than only development cooperation but we have to do a lot more together to have a joint position politically at the United Nations and continue to increase our business relationships.”

Trade remains a critical component of the EU-ACP relationship, even as sugar producers raise concerns over the potential impact on their economies of the planned elimination of the sugar quotas in 2017.

“We know that the end of the regime as we have it, because of treaty changes, because of change of legislation, so it’s not something that was possible to negotiate,” Polack said, adding that sugar producing countries within the ACP had “a very long transition period and the whole thing started in 2006”.

Additionally, he said, the EU has provided lots of budgetary support for the possible impact the change could have on sugar production.

“The whole idea behind it – and it’s not being pushed by the EU but it’s globally as well – is to be more market

oriented, meaning that we think that the new regime in a way will continue to give strong access because there is still a very strong demand for sugar in Europe and in the European Union, so we will still have a lot of opportunities for African Caribbean and Pacific countries, particularly in the Caribbean.

“So the future is more about strengthening our trade relationship, supporting directly the smaller farmers and the producers so that it continues to be a sector that benefits the entire population in the country.

“And we continue to be by far the main ‘aid for trade’ donors who support not only signing trade agreements like with CARIFORUM and CARICOM, but promoting the impact it has in terms of creating jobs for people and particularly giving access to basic services like health, education or sanitation to everyone.”

Trade officials note that while the EU-ACP relationship is evolving, so too are the required standards that must be met if goods from ACP countries are to be traded on the European market.

Developing countries now need to comply with several export requirements, including standards and technical regulations, which are referred to as Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT).

ACP countries receive assistance from the ACP-EU TBT Programme, which provides technical assistance for implementing regulatory frameworks and supporting development of conformity assessment services, which lead to promotion of regional and international trade. The programme is financed by the EU at the request of the ACP Secretariat.

Caribbean countries and businesses have received assistance from the TBT programme, namely Haiti’s National Bureau of Standards, pineapple exporters in the Dominican Republic, Caribbean Export and the Caribbean Agribusiness Association.

“This is an aspect that we believe is quite critical and needs to be addressed, because you can have products but if you’re not able to comply with the standards regionally, internationally, then you cannot be able to fully benefit from the opportunities you have,” the ACP’s Management and Quality Support Officer, Motooa Rammoneng, told CMC.

Rammoneng addressed the issue of TBTs at a conference here on Tuesday.

“As ACP we have relations with quite a number of countries, but if our products are not able to be internationally acknowledged because of the standards and so on, we can’t trade with them,” he said.

The TBT Programme Team Leader Junior Lodge, echoed similar sentiments.

“The global marketplace, especially the European Union, is very demanding and these standards are not going to be reduced simply to accommodate small vulnerable economies such as those in the Caribbean,” Lodge told CMC.

“So the issue is really how do we support our exporters in particular, to access these markets. And increasingly everyone recognises that in a context where tariffs are low, and in the case of the European Union they are non-existent, it is really the non-tariff measures which are critical and their compliance capacity in the Caribbean tends to be weak,” Lodge said.

Rammoneng stressed that ACP countries need to ensure they are able to compete at an international level, as they will no longer benefit from trade preferences.

