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AFRICA NEEDS A “TIME OUT” NOT PRESSURE TO STRENGTHEN ITS OWN REGIONAL INTEGRATION

This article was written by Rev. Malcolm Damon and Percy Makombe from the [Economic Justice Network of FOCCISA](#) (Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa).

Jointly German and African civil society organisations have assessed the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES). Concerning trade and regional integration they write:

“Trade between Europe and Africa could be a force behind development, but due to the negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) this is currently impossible. CSOs in Africa and the EU have therefore campaigned for truly development-oriented trade relations.

Furthermore, regional integration is important for development and therefore also an integral part of the JAES. In spite of this EPA negotiations and processes have hampered and not fostered regional integration.“

EPAs and regional disintegration

In Africa regional integration has given rise to about 14 blocs, with multiple memberships being a constant source of problems. In Eastern and Southern Africa alone there are six regional economic communities: the East African Community (EAC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU). Many African countries belong to more than one bloc.

The European Commission acknowledges that “the EU’s strength is built on regional integration” (European Commission, 2003); “the EU has thus pledged that the EPAs will be built on existing ACP regional integration initiatives” (European Commission, 2003).

EPA negotiations between the EU and the Eastern and Southern Africa bloc can also be seen as contributing to the fragmentation of existing regional initiatives. The initial ESA-EPA group consisted of the following countries: DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros and Madagascar. This group principally negotiated via COMESA. Yet it excluded the three COMESA members Angola, Egypt, and Swaziland which are in other EPA groupings. Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland (BLNS), plus Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania ¹(MAT) and South Africa²

¹ Tanzania eventually decided to negotiate an EPA as an East African Community country.

are all in the SADC-EPA group. Yet even this so-called SADC-EPA group excludes the four original founding members of the SADC Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Malawi and Zambia. Namibia was a member of COMESA but pulled out when the ESA-EPA was launched. This is very disappointing, especially because the EPA was promoted as a chance to strengthen regional integration. How much can be expected from a trade agreement that is meant to promote integration but then divides an existing and functioning region like the SADC?.

The EPA negotiations have resulted in very visible break-ups in the SADC region. For example, Tanzania left the SADC-EPA to become a member of the EAC-EPA. Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi are all members of the SADC but are negotiating the agreement as a part of ESA-EPA. These cases clearly show the pressure EPAs put on pre-existing regional groups and especially on the SADC.

The SADC region can illustrate what is wrong with the EPAs. EPAs have established themselves alongside older regional integration initiatives, thereby undermining the very thing they seek to establish – regional integration. This is integration turned upside down and threatens the development of the SADC. It has fragmented the SADC and has weakened those countries' potential bargaining power where they to negotiate as a solid region. Furthermore some of the involved countries have decided to sign interim EPAs not as a part of already fragmented groups but as individual countries, which is liable to make an already bad situation even worse. These are bizarre geographic reconfigurations of Eastern and Southern Africa and raise questions on the countries' commitment to regional integration.

African Regional Integration

On the other hand in Eastern, Southern and Western Africa regional communities have committed themselves to regional and trade integration. Last year for example the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA) was launched and they have committed themselves to build a customs union by 2012, a common market by 2015 and a monetary union by 2016. Analysts disagree on whether the SADC will be able to achieve this vision of regional integration.

The point is that neither the Economic Partnership Agreements nor the Joint Africa-EU Strategy helps with regional integration. In Theory they may appear to support integration but in reality Europe's actions are fracturing the little integration that already exists. What Africa needs is a break. It needs a break from the pressures of the European Union to sign Interim EPAs (IEPAs) and time to consolidate its own integration. Africa needs support for its own efforts not pressure.

² South Africa was initially excluded from this group and took part as an observer in the negotiations because it was argued that it already had its own agreement with the EU – the Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA). However South Africa is now included in the negotiations because it is a member of the Southern African Customs Union which also includes Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland. According to the SACU agreement no member can negotiate a new external trade regime without the consent of the others, hence the need for South Africa to be part of this process.