

ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly at crossroads

Similar to other European institutions where no legally binding decisions are taken, media hardly pay attention to the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA). At best it is prey to criticism about costly political tourism. However, while some serious challenges exist, the JPA constitutes a relevant actor in the EU's network of inter-parliamentary diplomacy. Looking beyond the formal aspects helps revealing its added value.

From 27 March to 1 April delegates from the European Parliament (EP) and the national parliaments of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (ACP) met in Tenerife to debate development concerns and global challenges. The JPA adopted common positions on the economic and financial impact of climate change and the social effects of the economic crisis. Furthermore the JPA called on the cancellation of Haiti's external debt and requests the effective implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan to ensure "credible, free and fair" elections. In a declaration on the EU-Latin America bananas agreement, the JPA urged the European Commission to increase the financial support for ACP and EU banana producers that will be affected by the deal and to consider additional financial and technical assistance to ACP countries.

The JPA meets twice a year alternately in a EU and an ACP country. The sessions in Europe are organized in the country holding the Council Presidency. For the 19th JPA session, the EU and ACP parliamentarians gathered in the sunny resort of Costa Adeje. The habitual beach tourists must have been surprised by the army of delegates dressed up in decent suits and the unusual presence of security forces. However, the Spanish Canary Islands are equally part of the Union. The shortest distance between the islands and Africa is 115 kilometers which symbolizes both the proximity and the boundaries between the EU and the African continent. Every year thousands of African migrants risk their lives by crossing the Atlantic Ocean to seek for a better life. Migration remains a major stumbling block in the EU-ACP relations and the issue was intensively discussed during the session. Apart from this, the banana producing Canary Islands symbolize a common interest of the ACP and European people.

Still the choice of location seems somewhat odd and easily feeds the critics, especially since the Assembly does not take binding decisions. However, blaming the parliamentarians for being political tourists and depicting the JPA as a sheer talking shop, puts it rather simply. Bringing together 156 parliamentarians from 105 countries from four different continents, the JPA constitutes a unique institution in the EU's network of inter-parliamentary diplomacy. It is the oldest and most institutionalized parliamentary assembly between countries of the North and the South and its framework has served as a model for similar forms of cooperation of the EP with third regions.

The existence of a joint parliamentary institution goes back to the eve of the establishment of the Yaoundé Convention (1963) when the Parliamentary Conference of the Association was created. During the successive Lomé Conventions and especially after the entry into force of the Cotonou Agreement, the parliamentary dimension of the EU-ACP cooperation framework has grown in importance, in line with the deepening and widening of the political dialogue. On 19 March 2010 the EU and ACP parties concluded the second revision of the Cotonou Agreement. The revised text extends the role of the JPA once again and recognizes the role of ACP national and regional parliaments as proper actors of the partnership. The amendments mark a new step forward in the more than 45 year long continuity of EU-ACP parliamentary cooperation.

The added value of the JPA is threefold. The JPA advocates parliamentary empowerment by enabling learning processes between EU and ACP parliamentarians. Its parliamentary debates and voting of resolutions on democracy, good governance and human rights socialize parliamentarians and through scrutiny of the executives it acts as a monitoring body of the implementation of the Cotonou objectives. Here, the active support of NGOs is a factor which should not be underestimated. During a slow but steady process the JPA arguably gained influence in these three domains. The Economic Partnership Agreements and the Country and Regional Strategy Papers have been – and continue to be – two key dossiers for the Assembly's growing importance.

However, while the role of the JPA has been strongly extended in the past decade, there are some serious endogenous and exogenous challenges that have a major impact on its activities and its influence. In spite of benevolent formal provisions, in practice the JPA still suffers from disparity, discontinuity and a lack of capacity. As the success of the JPA is partly based on the building of trust and the delivery of work of high quality, these challenges hamper both learning processes and political influence.

Furthermore the consultative Assembly is highly dependent on the power of its participating parliaments. The JPA can only fulfill its role if its debates are carried on in the EP and in the 78 national parliaments of the ACP states. The proliferation of competing parliamentary institutions overloads the already weak capacities of ACP officials and the increasing pressure on the maintenance of the longstanding EU-ACP partnership and the existence of the ACP as a group indicates the insecure future of the joint Assembly.

If the JPA aims to remain a key player in the EU-ACP relations, it should find a way to overcome the endogenous challenges. Recently its Bureau created a working group to upgrade the efficiency of the Assembly. However, it remains to be seen to what extent the EP, the national ACP parliaments, the EU-ACP Council and the European Commission have an interest in elaborating the JPA and the political dialogue of the EU-ACP cooperation. The JPA disposes of strong assets but time will tell if it will slide into irrelevance or manifest its unique added value.

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