

**The EU-ACP Internet Forum : A Place of Public Debate
and Collective Assessment to Improve Co-operation
between the Countries of the European Union and the
ACP Countries (African Caribbean, Pacific)**

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Résumé

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The EU-ACP Internet Forum: A Place of Public Debate and Collective Assessment to Improve Co-operation between the Countries of the European Union and the ACP Countries(Africa Caribbean Pacific)

I) Creation of the Forum and Birth of a New Type of Public Good

In the summer of 1998, the Committee on Development and Co-operation of the European Parliament, through its Chair, Michel Rocard, requested the organisation of a collective thinking process to contribute to the evolution of co-operation between the European Union and the ACP countries. This process was to include actors from both the ACP countries and the European Union, take its roots in the actual co-operation practices as seen by aid recipients, and contribute to the renegotiations of the Lomé Convention then in progress. The European Commission and the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation (FPH) responded to this request with a joint project under FPH co-ordination.

The process comprised three phases: I) a survey of experiences and Commission audits; II) an international seminar in Brussels in April 1999; III) organisation of an Internet forum (www.ue-acp.org) to discuss the proposals resulting from the first two phases. The forum, initially planned to last four months, was continued to last a total of ten months after the European Union and the FPH renewed their joint financing.

Its success reflected both a need and an opportunity

The EU-ACP Forum was an opportunity for continuous discussion on European co-operation and how it responds to the expectations and realities of the citizens of the Union and the ACP countries. It was a place for sharing ideas and information, and building collective proposals for the evolution of the role of co-operation and its effects.

a) A Need

International co-operation is a long chain that goes from the taxpayers of donor countries, transits through political and administrative bodies and various intermediaries, and reaches populations and agencies in poverty-stricken countries. Some have a voice, information networks and pressure groups, control over political negotiations, and can negotiate the mazes of the administrative and legal system. Others, those at the end of the chain, either collect the fruit of all that precedes, or undergo its consequences. The process suffers overall from a huge deficit in transparency and dialogue, and, above all, from the absence of voices from the rural communities, the underprivileged populations in the cities, small-farmers' organisations, and grassroots organisations. Yet, in the end, it is among the latter populations that we can measure the relevance and efficiency of a co-operation presumably designed in their favour.

Opening *a place of public debate* that makes negotiations and procedures transparent, limits the locational advantage of intermediaries, places the management of public funds under public scrutiny, circulates concrete experiences, puts intentions to the test of facts, measures the progress really accomplished, and gives equal value to the voices of the different actors: this was decisive progress as much for the construction of democracy as for the progress of governance.

b) An Opportunity

The EU-ACP Forum experience showed that an Internet forum complying with strict ethical and methodological rules, with truly professional facilitation, combining the virtue of an experience database and that of a live discussion, constituted *the prototype of a new democratic forum*. Such an ambition might have stumbled upon two obstacles: the low rate of Internet equipment in the ACP, in particular African countries, which limited access to the forum to a privileged few; and the possible collapse of the discussion after the enthusiasm of the first few weeks. These two obstacles turned out to be less significant than expected. First, because interest in the forum generated local discussion circles organised by people with access to Internet, acting thus as network leaders. Second, because the long-term, organised construction of the debate and the possibility of using the Web site as a source of information, constantly enhanced with new contributions and new experiences, made interest for the forum grow during the months that it lasted.

There are many obstacles yet to overcome. Messages signed by their authors' names made it difficult for Commission officers to express themselves. The French-speaking community dominated the debate despite systematic translation of all the messages and the documents made available on the Web site. These obstacles can be easily overcome by making the forum the object of a collective ambition, carried by several networks and appropriated by the different sectors.

Thus, beyond the identity of its promoters and the process that gave it birth, emerged a new type of public good, a form of virtual public space, an international agora, a method of democracy, a means for citizens to monitor public action, a collective instrument of social and cultural change.

This new type of public good is especially appropriate in the present transition phase, marked by the signature of a new co-operation agreement and reform of the European Union's international aid.

II) Ethical and Methodological Charter of the EU-ACP Forum

Public good and democratic space: these two qualifications call for constituent rules with which as much participants as facilitators are to comply. The constituent charter comprises two parts: an ethical part and a methodological part.

a) Ethics of the Forum

It is primarily an ethics of *opening, respect, and mutual attention*. Participants have no accounts to settle, do not resort to invectives, understand that reading their messages takes time, and share the common ambition to improve the relevance and efficiency of co-operation. Their contribution aims to move the discussion forward, to change the practices, and to reinforce, through the clarity of democratic control, the legitimacy and credibility of public management and international co-operation.

It is also *an ethics of truth*. Each has their point of view and holds their share of truth, but stereotyped language, self-promotion, and apologetic rhetoric are excluded.

Finally, it is *an ethics of the concrete*. The reality of co-operation is not in the literature and the procedures but in its effects on the field, and these effects can only be appreciated through the compilation of concrete experiences. Little does it matter that bad co-operation is the result of bad principles, bad procedures, a bad understanding of the challenges, or unsuitable relations between the actors. What counts are the effects that it produces.

b) Methodology of the Forum

The forum is a process built in space, in time, and with many kinds of participants. These are the three features that determine its methodology.

Involving *many kinds of participants*, it is designed like an international meeting, with a progression in the themes that are broached, co-ordinated contributions, regular summaries, further questions and, if necessary, work groups, breaks, and time for evaluation.

Organised *remotely*, it requires *attention to those who remain quiet*, questioning, stimulation, and regular assessments. Its participants must reflect a collective voice.

Organised over *a period of time*, the quality of the way it is constructed and recorded is even more important than the vivacity of the discussion. From the start, the Web site of the forum presented more than two hundred and sixty concrete experiences. The search engine available on the Web site allowed those who consulted it to browse through this mass of experiences at leisure and thus to benefit freely from its “collective intelligence”. Better yet, the *facilitation* methods of the forum allowed other participants to contribute their own experiences thanks to a dialogue with the Forum Co-ordination. This interaction, for which the discussion is only the visible part of a constantly enhanced collective experience, is a central element of the methodology.

III) Facilitation of the Forum

The forum is a public good and its management must be independent of any public authority. This guarantees its neutrality and the condition of its credibility. In this sense, such a forum is radically distinct from the Web sites that are institutional windows, which though necessary and legitimate, have a different role.

As a public good, the forum calls for public financing or public-interest private financing – such as from foundations – if possible with terms that will ensure its continuity. A steering committee made up of several groups of actors would guarantee its independence and would monitor the implementation of its ethical and methodological charter.

The facilitation of the forum could be entrusted for the first year to ECPDM. Facilitation would then be taken over for alternate two-year periods by European and ACP institutions. Each such institution should be chosen six months before the end of the period to ensure a proper transmission of the acquired experience.

EU-ACP FORUM

www.ue-acp.org

May 2000 marked the end of the experimental phase of a unique public-debate experience on the co-operation policy of the European Union with the countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific: the EU-ACP Forum.

The EU-ACP Forum was the first experience of a public electronic forum, financed by the European Commission, which was long-lasting (one year) and elaborated according to a very precise facilitation strategy.

Participation:

- more than 170 persons subscribed from more than 22 different countries, as individuals, or representing an organisation or a network
- a large variety of participants, made up of project managers, groups of local actors, and persons representing networks through which they transmitted the content of the debate
- an average of 2 messages were published per day
- 20% of the persons subscribed made direct contributions

Publication:

- A bilingual Web site with more than 1,500 pages recording the whole of the process
- 320 experience reports accessible on-line
- A search engine based on a thesaurus specific to the world of co-operation

Facilitation and capitalisation:

- A team of six experts mobilised two hours a day for one year
- A three-month capitalisation task involving sixty people in Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and Europe.

PURPOSE OF THE FORUM

In the framework of the renegotiations of the Lomé Convention and in view of further input from a complementary source, Michel Rocard, Chair of the Committee on Development and Co-operation of the European Parliament until 1999, wished at the time to promote a process of public debate called "Actors and Processes of Co-operation". It was approved and supported by the European Commission and co-ordinated by the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of Humankind (FPH).

A diagnosis of a large sample of co-operation actors' experiences showed that co-operation procedures between Europe and the countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific needed in-depth transformation, by:

- moving from project support to supporting processes
- backing a twofold dynamics of decentralisation and of regional integration
- transforming procedures and practices
- giving partnership back its meaning
- practising globalisation with a human face
- putting actors at the heart of European co-operation
- taking a fresh start from the local level
- making public information on aid the key to democratic control
- developing a Europe-ACP partnership in the management of flows of goods and people
- making of budgetary aid a collective process of the evolution of governance
- backing the actors and the processes by combining the Lomé convention and the European Union's own budget
- sparking off, with officer involvement, a dynamics of change within the commission
- promoting the need for a joint effort of the European Parliament and the European Commission

After a four-month discussion on the assessment of these topics and the formulation of corresponding proposals, the forum decided to move in three directions for the improvement of co-operation action, by:

1 - analysing and comparing co-operation experiences and thinking on the basis of the experience reports accessible on the Web site, in view of initiating a collective-assessment learning system;

2 – providing and obtaining information on co-operation policies (information sharing on co-operation, news updates on EU-ACP co-operation) **and transmitting the results and progress of the forum to the relevant institutions and media;**

3 – making free contributions to the forum on the topics identified by the participants in the first four months.

The discussion was organised along three lines:

a) **Information strategies:** "knowing for understanding" (What information and what actions are needed to understand the challenges of aid in general and of Lomé in particular?)

b) **Local monitoring and mobilisation strategies:** "identifying for action" (How can we monitor local reality and its interactions? How can we discuss locally our local and global findings?)

c) **Strategies to reorient actions intended to modify relations progressively:** "acting for transformation" (How and on the basis of what actions can the process of public debate contribute to renewing the international relations between the citizens and institutions of the North and the South?)

A PROCESS IN THREE PHASES

The process of public debate, the experimental phase of which ended in May 2000, comprised three phases:

Phase I: Compilation of experiences and proposals (December 1998 - March 1999)

Based on the methodology developed by DPH (Dialogue for the Progress of Humanity, an international network of experience sharing set up in 1988), 270 contributions emerged in the form of 1 to 3-page reports provided by actors on the field (NGOs, development experts, etc.), with, in addition, **20 interviews** with officers of the European Commission. A cross-analysis of the material and the production of a reference document to be discussed in the following phase concluded this phase.

Phase II: A seminar in Brussels (April 1999)

Presided by Michel Rocard and facilitated by FPH President Pierre Calame, the seminar gathered European Members of Parliament and European Commission officers, official representatives of the ACP countries, experts, and persons representing NGOs of the South and of the North. The seminar amended and approved the diagnosis developed in the position paper then studied some specific points thoroughly and proposed a broader discussion framework for the following months.

Phase III: A bilingual English-French electronic forum (May 1999 –May 2000)

Two means were adopted to circulate the position paper and enlarge the discussion: an **e-mail discussion list** in which the discussion continued for about a year for a collective validation of the proposals; and a **regularly updated Web site**, where the whole of the material produced was published. During this last phase, the Forum Co-ordination collected **new experience reports** by **monitoring** the information produced in the forum then **working with the authors**, thus following up on the work accomplished during the first phase and linking it to the evolution of the discussion.

After a four-month discussion on the reference document, **the forum changed in November 1999 to become a place where views, ideas, and proposals were exchanged on co-operation "as seen from the bottom"**.

- It facilitated a **collective assessment** in connection with the material available on the Web site.

- It played a **role of information** on co-operation policies **and of circulation** of this information to the media.
- It **developed the discussion** on strategies of information, local mobilisation, and renewed action in the field of EU-ACP co-operation.

A PUBLIC FORUM BASED ON THREE TOOLS

The EU-ACP Forum was founded on the use of three tools:

- **An e-mail discussion list** for the participants and the Forum Co-ordination
- **A Web site** presenting the process and recording all the contributions and documents that were shared.
- **A database** with a search engine and a thesaurus allowing access to more than 300 experience reports.

Moderation of the discussion was done “at the source”: the moderator received the messages before publication to check for proper formatting and to curb irrelevant contributions.

To ensure easy access to all the information of the forum, the Web site was constantly updated (publication), contributions were summarised (editing), experiences were identified and edited (capitalisation), the content was organised (database management), and everything was translated from English to French and French to English.

A 6-person team was thus in charge of facilitating the discussion and took part in its development with the forum participants.

EVALUATION OF THE FORUM & PERSPECTIVES

The forum thus developed mechanisms for co-operation dialogue and monitoring, open to actors of the South, beyond the strict framework of co-operation specialists.

The power of the tools (experience reports, experience bank, management and research software, a structured Internet search engine, and a Web site) **and the process into which they were integrated** (mobilisation of networks, continued support of participants, emergence of knowledge, communication on the forum, structuring and sharing information, analysis, monitoring, etc.) **made it possible to initiate a collective dynamics that produced a number of results:**

- information on the negotiations and on European programs
- locally organised discussion groups reported to the forum
- testimonies of action brought about by the forum and corresponding documents
- experience sharing on the basis of contributions to the forum and experience reports

- links to documents on other Web sites, in direct relationship with the topics of the discussion
- various, complementary proposals for one same topic
- South-South dialogue, intra and intercontinental
- extensive re-circulation of the messages beyond the persons subscribed to the forum
- etc.

A dynamic European-aid-watch dimension emerged from this experience of open debate supported by a structured information system. It was facilitated by the central position of the forum – a living, easily accessible space; there were documentary resources to support the analyses and proposals; the variety of participants enabled an exponential circulation of the information provided by the different networks.

In a remote discussion, the focus is usually on a previously defined content. Developments emerging from the exchanges are underestimated, and yet that is where the challenge lies: in the consideration of citizens' voices in the public debate. In this forum, the human resources mobilised over a long period of time and the very methodical approach in the organisation of the debate made it possible to move the debate in this direction.

It should also be noted that the year's duration granted to this forum facilitated participants' progressive moving to action. It was found that such duration was necessary to go beyond the usual inertia and to generate a participatory dynamics sustained by a strong mobilisation and active moderation on the part of the Forum Co-ordination.

Such a democratic forum will of course become more influential through the development of open and informal interconnections among the many networks that make up the world of North-South co-operation.

PRESENTATION OF THE CHARLES LÉOPOLD MAYER FOUNDATION FOR PROGRESS OF HUMANKIND

Origins

The foundation owes its existence to one man, Charles Léopold Mayer (1881-1971). Throughout his life he increased his fortune with a view of bequeathing it to scientific and humanitarian causes after his death. This legacy led to the establishment in 1982 of the Foundation for the Progress of Humankind (FPH). The Foundation operates solely on income from its founder's bequest.

Status

The Foundation is set up under Swiss law, has its headquarters in Lausanne and operates mostly from its offices in Paris.

Objectives

Until 1989, the Foundation financed research-action projects that included a connection between thinking and action and contributed to the capitalisation of experiences and the mobilisation of knowledge.

After a long sabbatical re-examination period, it gave up supporting specific projects and chose **to help actors of the different continents and from all different backgrounds to face their challenges, to develop alliances among them, to share their experiences, to define common perspectives, to act together, and to build a “collective intelligence” by mobilising and circulating knowledge** on the major world challenges in the North and in the South.

Action and Thinking

The FPH has focused its action and thinking on the links between the accumulation of knowledge and the progress of humankind in seven fields:

- the environment and the future of the planet,
- the meeting of cultures
- innovation and social change,
- the relationship between the State and Society,
- small-scale farming
- the struggle against social exclusion,
- the construction of peace.

The FPH supports and facilitates a permanent debate with partners of all different types (not-for-profit organisations, administrations, private firms, researchers, journalists, etc.) on the conditions for the production and mobilisation of knowledge at the service of those who have the least access to it. **It facilitates and supports meetings and the common work programs; it proposes a normalised system for information sharing in the form the DPH data bank,** which is a confederation of “partner networks” of the different continents on different topics; **it supports and facilitates the construction of networks and the circulation of experiences; it supports and facilitates work on the capitalisation of experiences, publishes or co-publishes works and discussion papers, and distributes its publications** through the FPH bookstore, partner publishers and bookstores, and its own networks.

THE DPH (DIALOGUE FOR THE PROGRESS OF HUMANITY) CAPITALISATION PROCESS

Integrated into the Forum Co-ordination (general co-ordination, forum and Web-site facilitation, various contributions, etc.), the AMI (Appui Mutuel pour un usage social de l'Information – Mutual Support for a social use of information) was in charge of the technical and methodological co-ordination of DPH. With a staff of five, it took part in the collective evaluation and the monitoring of information on the forum, and managed the experience bank that is available on the Web site.

The DPH process itself was included as a tool for the compilation, structuring, categorisation, and the technical management of the information, as a writing method with continued support of the authors, and as a framework for the contributions and the analysis of the material obtained.

The main challenge was, on the occasion of the debate and its objectives, to obtain a reliable, rigorous and efficient process, applicable to this type of operation. Responses to this challenge were built along the following lines:

Mobilising a variety of actors for the capitalisation of experiences:

About sixty European authors in the countries of the South contributed to this task. They represented a broad variety of actors, sometimes through surveys (village chiefs, farmers, activists, young co-operation agents, persons in charge of NGOs, businessmen, PhD students, academics, unionists, consultants, experts, ACP and EU delegation officers, etc.).

Obtaining in-depth, quality contributions:

A good number of the authors were accustomed to writing reports that use highly codified language, and to forms of external communication that were very different from what was asked of them. Some had trouble targeting the message and the proposals that they had to transmit, others diluted them, others yet found it difficult to keep within two pages. The work therefore focused on the following aspects: clarity of the message, communicability of the proposal, positioning of the author, and framing of the contributions to the common objective.

Offering continued support and developing information-management tools:

The role of the remote support involved the constitution of a reading group, constant communication by telephone and e-mail, the development of technical and methodological tools and validation procedures, strict technical management, and the development of models for the Web site.

Thinking and generating interactions between the capitalisation and the overall system of the public debate:

The objective was then to promote the use of experience reports once cross-analysis had been proposed; this made it possible to illustrate the discussion with the reports and to identify missing

factors, and through the monitoring of the debate, to encourage the drafting of new reports. The forum served to identify new authors, ideas and approaches, which were transformed into experience reports that were added to the experience bank. Comments on the reports were contributed regularly and a more advanced form of interaction on the Web site was thus developed.

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