

COMMUNIQUE:

PACIFIC CIVIL SOCIETY MEETING ON TRADE NEGOTIATIONS

Nadi, Fiji, 13-16 June 2006

Pacific island governments, as members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group (ACP) are meeting this week to prepare negotiating positions for an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union (EU). The negotiations are currently scheduled to be completed by December 2007, and aim to redefine the relationship between the EU and Pacific island states. The EPA is expected to replace current arrangements covered under the non-reciprocal Cotonou Partnership Agreement from the beginning of 2008.

As civil society groups meeting in Nadi, Fiji, we believe that trade agreements must have just and equitable development at their heart. Genuine sustainable development – including economic, social, cultural, gender and environmental dimensions - must be the central pillar of these agreements.

We are concerned that the proposed EPA in its current form will not fulfil these development objectives.

To address this, there must be a stronger partnership between government and civil society in the Pacific, to ensure that all aspects of the EPA and possible alternatives are explored, to achieve the best outcomes for the peoples of the Pacific, both at national and regional levels.

We were honoured that our conference heard addresses from Senator Kaliopate Tavola (Fiji's Minister of Foreign Affairs and External Trade and Chair of the Regional Negotiating Team); Hon. Misa Telefoni (Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa); Mr. Greg Urwin, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat; and Roy Mickey Joy (Vanuatu's Director of External Trade).

We also had valuable discussions with officials from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and trade negotiators from Pacific ACP governments, who shared their perspectives on the current preparations for an EPA.

However, following our discussion and our meetings with key government leaders, trade negotiators and officials, we believe there are many areas of concern that need to be addressed prior to any formal negotiating position being adopted:

1) IMPACT STUDIES:

There must be independent and extensive studies on the impacts - social, cultural, gender, economic, developmental and environmental - of the EPA, PACER and other regional trade agreements. There must be a deeper analysis of potential costs as well as benefits, to allow public discussion and decision on any trade-offs needed to reach an agreement.

From our dialogue with Forum Secretariat officials and Pacific government trade negotiators, we welcome their pledge that comprehensive impact studies will be carried out before commitments are finalised in the EPA negotiations.

2) PUBLIC CONSULTATION:

We seek a formal process of consultation with government as work on developing negotiating positions proceeds, including the EPA Formal Review in 2006.

3) TRANSPARENCY AND INFORMATION SHARING:

Meaningful consultation requires greater transparency and information sharing on the EPA between governments and community organisations, regarding the process, substance and implications of the negotiations.

4) NON-NEGOTIABLE ISSUES:

There are areas which should not be liberalised as part of trade deals, including our land, ownership and use of customary land, cultural heritage, key public services, food security and farmers' livelihoods.

5) REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY:

There is a need for Pacific countries to unite with common purpose, to avoid the danger that developed-country trading partners will attempt to divide island governments, and make demands in areas outside our common interests as island peoples.

These concerns have all been raised on a number of occasions in the past. As we move towards the deadline for the finalisation of the EPA, these issues are critical and need an urgent response.

IMPACT STUDIES

Regional trade agreements are not simply about economic benefits. They must address all aspects of human development, security and sustainability.

The process, terms of reference and outcomes of past impact assessments and current proposals for the PACER study fail to provide adequate guidance to governments and protect the interests of Pacific peoples.

For this reason, our conference drafted recommendations for the Terms of Reference for these studies, for the consideration of the Forum Secretariat and member governments.

It is essential that genuine impact assessments reflect the fundamental rights of Pacific peoples to poverty eradication, human development, vulnerability, environment, security and sustainability. People and governments must also have the capacity to participate effectively in such assessments.

We believe that these studies must be undertaken by qualified and independent people from the Pacific, through consultation at national and regional level. These studies must address the particular needs of rural communities, people with disabilities and the most marginalised sectors of our societies.

As civil society representatives, we commit ourselves to actively participate in this process, to help bring the voices of Pacific communities to the highest levels of government deliberations.

ANALYSING COSTS AS WELL AS BENEFITS

Governments have a moral and political obligation to safeguard the interests and well-being of the community. They should develop frameworks and legislation to ensure the monitoring and regulation of trade and corporate investment, for the benefit of our peoples.

Particular provisions in the EPA negotiations which could cause dangers to Pacific societies include the local impacts of foreign fishing operations, unregulated tourism, lack of control and regulation of foreign companies, lack of government capacity to regulate in the public interest, threats to essential public services such as water and energy, and pressures for alienation and foreign control of our land, especially customary land.

Strong regulatory frameworks should be in place before any liberalisation of investment and services. We are concerned that without such frameworks, there is potential for foreign investment in areas such as logging, mining and fisheries to create tensions and disputes within the community, which can lead to conflict and violence.

Governments must avoid Investment Protection Agreements which give corporations undue rights and limit government policy options.

An EPA may provide important benefits such as greater access to the European labour market for skilled workers from the Pacific. But we are concerned that greater labour mobility under EPA and PACER will be used to demand unacceptable trade-offs from Pacific island countries, including the reciprocal demand for unrestricted entry for overseas professionals and executives which will affect employment in our region.

We are also concerned that the EU has refused to respond to Pacific calls for:

- a regional agreement on fisheries, having already developed bilateral fisheries agreements with three island nations;
- reform of investment facilities;
- reform of rules of origin, Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) and other unfair trade barriers;
- additional funding for the costs of adjustment and capacity building for Pacific ACP countries to benefit from new market access.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

We welcome the proposals from our leaders and officials to forge a stronger partnership between government and community organisations, to promote the welfare and development of our Pacific peoples. The proposal for the establishment of Trade Advisory Committees at national level and other consultative structures at regional level provide important mechanisms to engage in formal and ongoing discussion on the content of any partnership agreements.

We urge Pacific Island Governments to utilise the resources of civil society organisations, to raise awareness about regional trade negotiations and the ways they will affect the peoples of the region.

TRANSPARENCY AND INFORMATION SHARING

The lack of meaningful consultation and transparency on the EPA is a concern for civil society. It seems that it is only government trade officials and their counterparts in the Forum Secretariat who have a detailed knowledge of the EPA and what it offers. The region's civil society organisations are fearful that the EPA trade negotiations are being carried out purely on the basis of theoretical economic analysis.

We call for a campaign of education and mobilisation to inform the public about important issues that are being decided in the coming weeks and months. This should involve a range of government departments (other than trade ministries), churches, trade unions, NGOs, private sector organisations, environment groups, landowners associations, councils of chiefs etc, as well as local communities.

We commit to undertake public education campaigns and call on government and Forum officials to provide more information and engage in open and meaningful dialogue.

NON-NEGOTIABLE DEMANDS

There are areas which should not be liberalised as part of trade deals, including our land, ownership and use of customary land, cultural heritage, key public services, food security and farmers' livelihoods.

The EPA negotiations and trading agreements between EU and ACP countries raise issues that have been rejected by developing countries in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), such as competition policy and government procurement.

We believe these issues should not be part of the current negotiations.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Pacific governments need to maintain solidarity when they negotiate for the EPA. This unity needs to extend to other developing countries who are struggling to obtain just trade rules internationally through the WTO.

We are especially concerned about OECD countries, including regional partners like Australia and New Zealand, who are demanding unfair, excessive concessions as Pacific countries like Tonga accede to WTO membership.

We call for regional solidarity, information sharing and support to ensure that small island states are not played off against each other. The EPA negotiations should not be used to undercut developing country policies being protected in other multilateral forums.

Civil society groups have expertise and influential networks that our governments can use to carry Pacific island concerns to the international stage.

We will work with our colleagues in Australia and New Zealand to resist pressure on our governments to begin negotiations under PACER through linkage to the EPA.

We call on EU member states to be accountable for the negotiations being undertaken in their name. We will lobby our counterparts in Europe for support against the intransigence of EU negotiators on key areas of concern. We call on our partners in Europe and in African and Caribbean countries to carry our voices into other forums in the weeks and months to come.

The consultation in Nadi Fiji brought together over 60 representatives of churches, non-governmental organisations, trade unions, national business and farmer groups, women's and environment organisations, people's movements and academics from 12 Pacific countries. Participants included key regional bodies such as the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), the World Council of Churches – Office of the Pacific, Pacific Foundation for the Advancement of Women (PACFAW), the South Pacific and Oceanic Council of Trade Unions (SPOCTU), Council of Pacific Education (COPE), Pacific Concerns Resource Centre (PCRC), Pacific Island Association of NGOs (PIANGO), Disabled Peoples' International, Greenpeace Australia Pacific, and the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG). Participants thanked Oxfam for their support in hosting the conference.