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# There is life beyond the European Union: revisiting the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States

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## ABSTRACT

The African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group, established in June 1975 by the Georgetown Agreement, was generally seen as an emanation of the European Union (EU). This article presents a non-EU-centric perspective by discussing various initiatives aimed at fostering intra-ACP cooperation and promoting common ACP positions in international settings. Furthermore, it analyses various threats to the survival of the ACP Group, some linked to its allegedly ineffective performance as an organisation, others related to the rise of competitors, most notably the African Union. Importantly, it delves into the reform process that culminated in the adoption of the revised Georgetown Agreement in December 2019, which transformed the ACP Group into the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), with the aim of establishing it as a relevant and influential global actor and reducing its dependence on the EU. In revisiting the evolution of the OACPS, this article identifies an intentions–capability gap, specifically between the often grandiose statements of official discourse and the institutional and financial resources devoted to implementing stated objectives.

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## Introduction

On 11 December 2019, the heads of state and government of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group meeting in Nairobi endorsed the proposed revision of the Georgetown Agreement, which is the constitutive act of a constellation of 79 states established on 6 June 1975 in the capital of Guyana. The revised Georgetown Agreement introduced, amongst others, two substantial changes: it transformed the ACP Group into the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) and redefined the scope of the OACPS, with the aim of enhancing its autonomy from the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup> As aptly put by the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Amor Mottley, in her keynote speech at the ACP Summit in Kenya: ‘By virtue of the revised Georgetown Agreement, we can forge an international organization that is suited to us and our future. We the members of the ACP must function on our own terms, not on the terms set by others’ (CANA, 9 December 2019). The charge to the ACP Group of being an outgrowth of sorts of the EU emerges from the amount of academic work that has been devoted to ACP–EU relations, most of which takes an EU-centric approach.<sup>2</sup> The

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nature and functions of the ACP Group, conversely, have been largely overlooked (cf. Hall and Blake 1979; Keijzer 2016; Carbone 2020), a gap this article seeks to address by exploring the various initiatives that, over the years, have been taken to advance cooperation within and beyond the OACPS (that is, intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation).

This article, accordingly, revisits the evolution of the OACPS to establish whether, as claimed by an African ambassador, 'it can, and in fact does, have a life of its own, beyond its longstanding partnership with the EU' (Interview with African ambassador, March 2020). To do so, it draws on primary sources (including internal reports and unpublished documents), different types of contributions of ACP policymakers, and specialised media sources, especially from the three ACP regions.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it relies on 24 semi-structured interviews with ACP ambassadors, OACPS Secretariat officials and representatives of the African Union (AU), conducted in two rounds: the first between March and May 2018, and the second between December 2019 and May 2020.

In tracing the trajectory of the OACPS, this article identifies a sort of intentions–capability gap. On the one hand, official discourse has celebrated the ACP Group as an international organisation of the South, consistently working towards the achievement of a more just global order and capable of delivering to its members more than they would be able to secure individually in their interactions with different actors from the North. On the other hand, ACP states have been reluctant not only to allocate adequate amounts of financial resources but also to create the necessary institutional architecture to promote effective intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation. This gap between intentions and capability has affected the performance of the ACP Group and has increased its vulnerability to exogenous and, since the late 2010s, even endogenous threats to its existence, with some African states manifesting scepticism at the ability of the ACP Group to best represent their interest in international settings. This argument is developed in three sections, covering three phases: the first investigates the genesis of the ACP Group and its initial consolidation; the second delves into a period characterised by patchy attempts to deepen cooperation as well as a widening of membership; the third examines the reform process that culminated in the establishment of the OACPS.

## The beginnings of the ACP Group

The origin of the ACP Group, 'for better or for worse' (Asante 1981, 661), can be traced to the historical relationship between the European Union and its colonies. The Treaty of Rome of March 1957 established 'the association of overseas countries and territories', which were granted the same trade treatment as EU member states and received a sizeable amount of foreign aid through the European Development Fund (EDF). Following the process of decolonisation, numerous newly independent states, mostly former French colonies in West Africa, were determined to preserve their status of association with the EU. The Yaoundé Convention between the EU and the Associated African States and Madagascar (AASM), signed in July 1963 and renewed in July 1969, maintained the aid system created by the Treaty of Rome, but instituted 18 free trade areas between the EU and each of the associates, with the latter enjoying some form of preferential access to the EU market. The AASM were a rather weak and incohesive cluster of states, with little experience in international diplomacy, so they

played a subordinate role in the negotiations and inevitably accepted what was given rather than pushing for their preferences (Zartman 1971).

Other independent states in Africa initially turned down association with the EU. However, in September 1969, three former British colonies in east Africa (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) signed the Arusha Agreement with the EU, which rested on reciprocal preferential access to each other's markets but contained no provisions on financial and technical assistance – whereas the Lagos Convention of July 1966 between the EU and Nigeria, concluded along similar lines, was never ratified as a consequence of the war in Biafra. The entry of the United Kingdom into the EU in January 1973 had a direct impact on those countries that eventually formed the ACP Group: by virtue of British accession, all Commonwealth states became 'associables', although this was not their preferred solution among the possibilities envisaged by the European Union.

The process of convergence among the three clusters of states in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, in view of the negotiations for an agreement with the EU that replaced the expiring Yaoundé Convention and involved the former British colonies, was tortuous. The Caribbean region, despite significant differences in the level of development between smaller and larger states, achieved unity with the establishment of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) in April 1973 and was adamant about uniting with the other two regions – a position that was shared by the Pacific Islands. The African states, by contrast, were divided: the AASM were reluctant to share in the benefits of their privileged status, whereas the Commonwealth countries maintained their reservations on the idea of associationism, seen as a continuation of colonialism. An instrumental role in reaching a consensual position was played by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which promoted the adoption of some general principles and a common negotiating strategy – with a leading role played by Nigeria as well as Ghana (Gruhn 1976; Hall and Blake 1979; Mgbere 1994; Oloruntoba 2016). Nevertheless, at the outset of the negotiations with the EU there were still divergences between and within the three ACP regions, particularly in relation to the principle of reciprocity in the trade regime: 'some people wanted to see this principle maintained for political reasons, while others thought reciprocity was out of the question on moral grounds, bearing in mind the inequality of the trading partners' (Oumar Sy 1985, 53).

All differences were eventually ironed out, and in the spring of 1974 Senegal's Minister of Finance Babacar Ba, acting as a joint spokesperson, announced to the EU: 'you have before you not three groups expressing harmonised positions with one voice, but a single group of ACP countries which want to recognize their common destiny and the unshakeable desire to achieve positive results at these negotiations' (cited in *Horizons*, June 2015, 8). The blend of some African heavyweights and Caribbean diplomatic skills reinforced the bargaining power of the ACP cluster of states and altered the balance in the negotiations. Interestingly, Ronald Green, then economic adviser to the government of Tanzania, maintains that the EU was caught by surprise, assuming that the 'inability to carry out technical work or to resolve not entirely identical economic interests would render the ACP negotiators unable to sustain initiatives' (Green 1976, 45; see also Frisch 2008). Indeed, the ACP states extracted several favourable concessions, most notably a trade regime resting on the principle of non-reciprocity, which created expectations that the outcome of their negotiations with the EU could become a model for North–South cooperation (Ravenhill 1985). As eloquently stated by Ramphal (2014, 172),

Never before had so large a segment of the developing world so effectively negotiated with so powerful a grouping of developed countries .... Through the process of unification, the Third World moved away, however fractionally, from the periphery of economic power to which the existing international system assigns it.

The existence of the ACP Group is undoubtedly linked to the process leading to the adoption of the Lomé Convention (Hall and Blake 1979; Slocum-Bradley 2007). However, as acknowledged by Dieter Frisch, a former director general in the European Commission heavily involved in ACP–EU affairs, ‘The creation of the ACP Group, fostered by the challenge of negotiations with Europe, was strictly an ACP initiative’ (Frisch 2008, 12). The idea of a single group from the South promoting Afro–Caribbean relations, in fact, had been advanced by Guyana’s then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Shridath Ramphal in a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Georgetown in August 1972 (Ramphal 2014). The initial purpose of the cluster of ACP states was that of ensuring effective coordination in the negotiations of the Lomé Convention, but it soon emerged that they could coalesce on many other issues, including some of general interest to all developing countries, in line with calls for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) (Hall and Blake 1979; Talburt 2015). The ACP states, as put by Senegal’s then-ambassador in Brussels Oumar Sy (1985, 53), ‘refused to be also-rans, completely dependent for their development and forced, essentially, to contribute to the equilibrium and prosperity of Europe but wanted instead to be a means of South–South cooperation’ and, on 6 June 1975, ‘sealed their common destiny’ with the signature of the Georgetown Agreement.

The Georgetown Agreement, indeed, contained two sets of objectives, both conceived as part of a wider goal: ‘to promote the establishment of a new world economic order’ (ACP 1975). The first set of objectives was in relation to the management and implementation of the Lomé Convention – and it was even specified that a state wishing to become a member of the ACP Group had to first accede to the Lomé Convention. The second set of objectives, however, referred to the promotion and strengthening of unity and solidarity among ACP states through greater trade, economic and cultural relations and through regional and inter-regional cooperation, including with other developing countries (ACP 1975). Importantly, throughout the negotiations with the EU, the ACP states declared that they would not commit to anything that could negatively affect the interest of the Third World (Hall and Blake 1979). It is therefore not surprising that the ACP Group perceived itself as ‘a first venture in “Trade Union of the Poor”<sup>4</sup> collective self-reliance’ (Green 1976, 45), ‘a champion for Third World aspirations and not merely a privileged club’ (Carrington 1985, 74), or an ‘attempt to supplement or support the larger goals of the Group of 77’ (Nyagah 1985, 70). More critical observers disagree with these views, arguing that the formation of the ACP Group served to further institutionalise South dependence on the North (Asante 1981), generated divisions within the developing world, particularly between ACP and Latin American countries (Dolan 1978), and slowed the creation of other regional South–South constructs (Laurent 1983).

The Georgetown Agreement, moreover, stipulated that the ACP Group would operate on an inter-governmental basis (see Table 1). The ACP Council of Ministers was set to be the supreme organ, with decisions made by consensus. However, it soon became evident that the Committee of Ambassadors, in theory meant to assist the ACP Council of Ministers, was ‘effectively the only organ for the implementation of the objectives of the ACP Group’ (Dodoo 1985, 60). The establishment of the ACP Secretariat was considered very bold for a group of

**Table 1.** Organs of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States.

- *Summit of Heads of State and Government.* It is the supreme decision-making organ of the OACPS, generally meeting every three years. It lays down the general policy of the OACPS and takes decisions on key issues pertaining to the realisation of the objectives of the OACPS.
- *Council of Ministers.* It comprises the Ministers of Foreign Affairs or any Minister or Authority designated by each Member State, generally meeting twice a year. It determines the modalities for the implementation of the general policy and objectives of the OACPS and periodically monitors and evaluates their state of execution, prepares and coordinates the implementation of decisions of the Summit, and provides strategic direction to and analysis of the Secretariat's work programme and implementation of mandate.
- *Committee of Ambassadors.* It comprises the head of missions in Brussels of each Member State, generally meeting once per month. It supports, advises, and carries out any mandate assigned to it by the Council of Ministers and facilitates cooperation with third actors.
- *Secretariat.* It provides services to and executes the decisions of the organs of the OACPS, and implements agreements concluded with third actors. Located in Brussels, it is headed by a Secretary General (appointed for a non-renewable term of five years), who manages staff, projects and programmes of the OACPS, acts as spokesperson and representative of the OACPS, and may negotiate, conclude, and sign agreements with third actors upon authorisation of the Council of Ministers.
- *Parliamentary Assembly.* It comprises one member of each parliamentary house of each Member State, meeting at least once per year. It engages with all other organs of the OACPS, making resolutions and recommendations.

Source: ACP (2019).

Note: Composition and functions reflect changes made by the revised Georgetown Agreement of December 2019.

states from the developing world – in fact, nothing similar was foreseen for the G-77. As put by the first ACP Secretary General, Tiéoulé Konaté,

the Founding Fathers of the ACP Group decided that, without a permanent secretariat, it would be virtually impossible to ensure the lasting maintenance of the political will and solidarity of so many countries that were spread over three continents and had different economic strengths, populations, political regimes, working languages and vernaculars. (Konaté 1985, 84)

Nonetheless, the ACP Secretariat was entrusted with limited powers, mostly related to servicing the two state-driven organs of the ACP Group, which clearly indicated the type of organisation ACP leaders had in mind – and, it should be added, the Georgetown Agreement did not mention the ACP Secretary General, a revealing lacuna which was addressed only subsequently (Dodoo 1985; ACP 1992).

### Cooperation fatigue, widening, deepening

The first decade that followed the adoption of the Georgetown Agreement was devoted to advancing and operationalising intra-ACP cooperation, which refers to 'any cooperation including two or more ACP member states', including regional organisations (Green 1987, 3). A first attempt was made in April 1977 with the adoption of the Suva Declaration, which proposed to 'translate into practical action the principles of collective self-reliance and self-determination by the ACP countries to reinforce their unity and capacity for joint action', in particular by focussing on six sectors: transport and communications, trade, intra-ACP enterprises, development finance, technology, and culture (ACP 1977). Various seminars and conferences were held and various studies were carried out on these themes, including through the Montego Bay Plan adopted in July 1980. These initiatives, however, generated 'no actual results' (Nyagah 1985, 70) and, besides some 'wordy resolutions', there is little evidence that the members of the ACP Group became more salient to each other (Ravenhill 1985, 315). A further attempt was made in October 1985 with the Harare Declaration (ACP 1985), which did not go beyond calling for further studies on practical cooperation measures and improvement of the existing institutional setting for intra-ACP cooperation, particularly

the ACP Secretariat (*Inter Press Services*, 26 October 1985), so much so that the then ACP Secretary General Edwin Carrington admitted: 'We of the ACP have talked a lot, philosophized a lot, we have studied a lot, we have met a lot. We have not done much else' (*The Courier*, March–April 1990, 18–19). Such a dearth of achievements, which persisted for most of the 1990s, was analogous to the slow progress recorded in integration processes advanced by regional organisations across the ACP Group, particularly in Africa. A large majority of ACP states, in fact, faced severe economic crises, which resulted in limited allocations of financial resources for intra-ACP cooperation and no concrete measures to reinforce ACP institutions and structures: unsurprisingly, the sober conclusion at the end of the 1990s was that the ambitious objectives and aims of intra-ACP cooperation, both economically and politically, remained largely unfulfilled (Mailafia 1997; Greenidge 1999).

The issue of extra-ACP cooperation – that is, cooperation between ACP states in international settings beyond the EU – was less prominent, even in official discourse. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, ACP states did not use the ACP Group as a platform to promote their interests on the world stage. The ACP Secretariat took part in many international conferences (*The Courier*, March–April 1990; Karl 2000), yet the ACP Group did 'not function as a *group* (emphasis is in the original); nor did it 'serve as a 'similarizing' agent among the various regional units, in the sense of orienting them to share a common or at least similar position on the major international issues of the day' (Carrington 1985, 75). An exceptional case is the position taken against apartheid in South Africa in the late 1980s – complemented by pressure exercised on a recalcitrant EU to impose broad sanctions against the South African government (*Inter Press Service*, 18 December 1987; *Inter Press Service*, 26 April 1988).

As for cooperation with other developing countries, very little was even attempted, largely because the ACP Group was seen by other developing countries as a breaker of Third World solidarity, particularly for its intransigence in defending the preferential trade regime accorded to it by the EU, in contrast with the approach promoted by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), for a generalised system of preferences to be extended to all developing countries (Dolan 1978; Laurent 1983). Interestingly, Carrington acknowledged that, on various occasions, the ACP Group 'had to remove lingering doubts about what is sometimes perceived and misconstrued as inconsistency between its position and that of the Group of 77' (Carrington 1985, 75). Indeed, this type of distrust persisted until the early 2000s (Interview with OACPS Secretariat official, March 2020).

Such limited progress in the deepening of cooperation was accompanied by a widening of membership. Twenty states joined the ACP Group between 1979 and 1985 and five more joined in the mid-1990s, before the subsequent accession of 10 members in the early 2000s: the 79 members of the OACPS at the end of 2020 included 48 states from sub-Saharan Africa, 16 from the Caribbean and 15 from the Pacific (see Table 2). South Africa and Cuba are special cases: South Africa became a full member of the ACP Group in April 1997, but a qualified member of the ACP–EU Agreement as it was excluded from the aid and trade provisions; Cuba became a member of the ACP Group in December 2000, but did not accede to the ACP–EU Agreement: this entailed a revision of the Georgetown Agreement to separate membership of the ACP Group from accession to the ACP–EU Agreement. The widened membership has proved challenging for ACP Group actorness in that the increasingly diverging interests between its members has made it more difficult to defend its relevance.

One of the key reasons for the power of attraction of the ACP Group was the preferential trade regime granted by the EU, but this eventually became the key reason behind the first

significant threat to its geographical integrity. Given the incompatibility of the Lomé trade regime with World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, the European Commission recommended concluding different economic partnership agreements (EPAs) negotiated with different ACP regions, rather than with the entire ACP group, which rested on trade liberalisation and, clearly, marked the end of non-reciprocity. The ACP Group sought in vain to resist the EU proposal, though some significant fractures started to emerge: the Caribbean region, in contrast to the African and Pacific regions, appeared more wedded to the idea of free trade agreements (Byron 2005; Slocum-Bradley 2007; Ilorah and Ngwakwe 2015; Oloruntoba 2016). Importantly, as admitted by the former ACP Secretary General Patrick Gomes,

the concession of the ACP Group to the demands of the EU that EPAs be negotiated within its regions had a heavily fragmentary effect on ACP solidarity. Subsequent events created mistrust and even some disenchantment with the Caribbean region that signed an EPA by 2008. (Gomes 2013, 720)<sup>5</sup>

The perceived attack on the integrity of the ACP Group triggered the first meeting of ACP heads of state and government in Libreville (Gabon) in November 1997. The Libreville Summit, characterised by an emerging 'frustration' at the EU's shift of interest to countries in eastern and central Europe, marked the beginning of a new direction for the ACP Group, thanks to a series of initiatives taken in relation to both intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation (*Inter Press Services*, 5 November 1997). Historically, the ACP Group had refrained from interfering in the domestic affairs of its members and from censuring those states that did not uphold political norms such as human rights and democracy. The adoption of detailed guidelines on intra-ACP political dialogue by the ACP Council of Ministers in December 2002 and the addition of specific objectives to the November 2003 revision of the Georgetown Agreement to promote and reinforce political dialogue were celebrated as 'a positive step of the long-due politicisation of the ACP Group' (Interview with Pacific ambassador, May 2020), yet they resulted only in some observer missions with no follow-up actions, even in cases of coup d'état (Babb and Babb 2006; Nono 2015).

An attempt was made to strengthen intra-ACP regional cooperation, specifically by seeking to capitalise on the positive experiences of various regional organisations for the benefit of the entire ACP Group. The consequences of the establishment of the Inter-Regional Organisations Coordinating Committee (IROCC) in October 2001, however, were once again only a few inconclusive meetings.<sup>6</sup> In fact, one of the weaknesses of the ACP Group was that of not having been able to facilitate learning from the successes of its members, for instance through the sharing of best practices (Lodge 2014). In the end, some satisfactory results on intra-ACP cooperation could be reported only in the areas of human and social development, including cultural cooperation, though it should be noted that all resources for these initiatives came from the European Development Fund (Nono 2015; Keijzer 2016; Carbone 2020).

Since the early 2000s there have also been attempts to advance extra-ACP cooperation, though some divergences have arisen with regards to relations with the EU. On the one hand, to use the words of former ACP Secretary General Jean-Robert Goulongana, some have pointed to the 'need to join forces with other partners who can help us defend our interests without, however, jeopardizing our special relationship with the [European] Union' (Karl 2000, 23). On the other hand, it is claimed that the global actorness of the ACP Group has been hindered

**Table 2.** Evolution of OACPS membership.

June 1975 (signature of Georgetown Agreement)	Bahamas, Barbados, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Brazzaville), Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Samoa, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, Zambia
October 1979 (signature of Lomé II)	Cabo Verde, Comoros, Djibouti, Dominica, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Saint Lucia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Tuvalu
November 1980 (accession to Lomé II)	Zimbabwe
December 1984 (signature of Lomé III)	Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Mozambique, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Vanuatu
April 1985 (accession to Lomé III)	Angola
January 1994 (accession to Lomé IV)	Eritrea
November 1995 (signature of Lomé IV-bis)	Dominican Republic, Haiti, Namibia
April 1997 (accession to Lomé IV-bis)	South Africa
June 2000 (signature of Cotonou Agreement)	Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau
December 2000 (decision of ACP Council of Ministers)	Cuba
May 2003 (accession to Cotonou Agreement)	Timor-Leste

Source: <http://acp.int/> (accessed on 15 December 2020).

by the fact that third states, on various occasions, have avoided interacting with a group of states that they see as an emanation of the EU (Bradley 2004; Babb and Babb 2006).<sup>7</sup> The emergence of new actors in international development – especially Brazil, China and India – was hailed as an opportunity to allay this misconception (Babb and Babb 2006; Mailafia 2014; Montoute and Virk 2017). The view within a majority of ACP states, as put by former ACP Secretary General Mohamed Ibn Chambas, was that ‘Unlike the Chinese, the European mindset continues to view the ACP as a problem rather than an opportunity’ (CANA, 17 August 2012). Nevertheless, cooperation with emerging powers has been limited to ad hoc dialogues, particularly in the context of the discussions of the Doha Development Agenda, as these have preferred to engage with ACP states bilaterally. Similarly, the ambition of the ACP Group to carve out a role for itself as a knowledge hub for South–South cooperation and for triangular cooperation has not gone much beyond some sporadic projects, various symposia and the setting up of an information centre in Equatorial Guinea (Nsoudou 2014; UNOSSC 2019).<sup>8</sup> In the end, perhaps the most visible case of ACP Group presence in the international arena is in relation to the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change in December 2015. Indeed, the formation of the so-called High Ambition Coalition, initially between the ACP Group and the EU and eventually extended to other states, was considered a ‘game changer’ in that it put significant pressure on major emitting countries, particularly China and India, for a far-reaching deal on mitigation of and adaptation to the effects of climate change (Carbone 2019a).

The case of trade cooperation exemplifies the variation in outcomes with regards to intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation. On the one hand, the ACP Group has contributed only marginally to stimulating intra-ACP trade, much less than the EU or the North American Free

Trade Area (NAFTA)– interestingly, a significant share of intra-ACP trade is done among the members of the same region, whereas trade flows between regions are weak (see Table 3). Granted, there are also structural problems, linked to the existence of different types of trade barriers between ACP states or the production of the same types of commodities (UNCTAD 2018). Nevertheless, two grandiose and much-discussed initiatives have not materialised, facing latent opposition by different ACP states: first, the proposal for an intra-ACP Free Trade Area was put aside after a feasibility study found ‘limited additional incentives besides existing commitments in regional integration efforts’ (cited in ACP 2014, 5); second, the proposal for an ACP Investment Bank was also dismissed, in this case despite the recommendation of a feasibility study to set it up as an effective way to address the financing gap for private-sector development and other critical areas to ACP states (Seck 2013).

On the other hand, the ACP Group has managed to obtain some results in the WTO context, where it has been a staunch supporter of the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries and has sought to ensure that development remains at the centre of WTO decisions.<sup>9</sup> In particular, it has been very active, for instance, on matters related to fisheries subsidies and intellectual property (Interview with ACP Secretariat official, March 2020). However, its most notable accomplishment is in the area of trade facilitation: in December 2013, it managed to shape the ninth WTO ministerial conference held in Bali (Indonesia) by crafting a comprehensive, development-oriented proposal on trade facilitation, whereby developing countries’ trade commitments would be triggered only on receipt of capacity building support by the North, a proposal that became the basis for negotiations and which was in large part eventually adopted (Lodge 2014; *Horizons*, June 2015). The establishment of an office in January 2002 in Geneva – portrayed in an internal report, perhaps overstating the case, as ‘an act of independence and solidarity of the ACP Group which points the way for other cohesive and practical activities outside of the EU cocoon’ (Babb and Babb 2006, 58) – has certainly helped promote greater coordination and better articulation of the demands of ACP states, particularly those that do not have diplomatic representation in Geneva (Interviews with ACP ambassadors and with OACPS Secretariat officials, January–May 2020). Perhaps more important were the changes to the ACP–EU trade regime in compliance with WTO rules: as stated by a senior OACPS official, ‘relations between the ACP Group and other developing countries normalised at the beginning of the 2000s and since then it has become easier for us to craft common positions to promote the interests of the South’ (Interview with OACPS Secretariat official, March 2020).

The active role of the ACP Group in the WTO has generally been welcomed by all ACP states, since it is seen as ‘pushing the cause of the South’ and ‘playing a constructive role in organising the interests of developing countries vis-à-vis the North’ (Interviews with OACPS

**Table 3.** Intra-trade in the OACPS (% of the total).

	1995–99	2000–04	2005–09	2010–14	2015–19
OACPS	13.08	12.94	13.43	16.87	17.87
Africa	13.96	13.37	13.34	17.03	18.91
Central	1.39	1.06	1.37	1.69	2.22
Eastern	12.22	13.52	14.22	13.12	13.67
Southern	7.49	2.84	2.91	14.30	14.31
Western	9.61	9.38	8.62	7.67	8.81
Caribbean	9.18	9.54	11.47	12.24	10.63
Pacific	0.82	1.84	2.10	2.60	1.89

Source: UNCTAD (2018).

Secretariat officials, March–May 2020). In this regard, Carl Greenidge, Guyana's former foreign minister and a veteran of the ACP Group, represents a non-isolated view when he claims that

the future of the ACP lies in its ability to bring the diversity that it represents in a manner that generates synergy as a counter-balancing force in the international community, as a mechanism for bringing the challenges facing developing countries in particular to the fore, for articulating their voice and in the international community throwing their voice so it can be heard, it can be effective, it can be meaningfully structured. (*PINA*, 12 June 2016)

Conversely, the case of the Paris Agreement on climate change, widely celebrated in official discourse (ACP 2017), provoked discontent in some ACP states, specifically those who lamented the fact that the alliance with the EU had, once again, weakened solidarity among Third World countries and the negotiating position of the G-77 (Interview with African ambassador, December 2019). The primary impediment to an enhanced capacity of the ACP Group in the international arena, however, is the overlapping membership of ACP states with other groupings, including regional or continental organisations that allegedly are considered more effective and legitimate (Bradley 2004; Keijzer 2016). In this regard, Carlos Lopes, former executive secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, has lamented that, because of the ACP Group, 'Africa punches below its weight, certainly not at its weight, much less above its weight' (*The New Times*, 9 July 2018). Not less important is the issue of external representation: no official position has ever been created for someone to speak on behalf of the whole ACP Group, so this function has been performed, occasionally, by the president in office or the secretary general (Babb and Babb 2006; Carbone 2020).<sup>10</sup>

A significant weakness of, and a source of criticisms to, the ACP Group is that it has outsourced most of its functions to the two Brussels-based organs, so much so that, unsurprisingly, it is largely unknown in national capitals beyond a small circle of officials involved in aid and trade issues. The uneasy relationship between the Committee of Ambassadors and the ACP Secretariat is well documented, and this has certainly affected the performance of the ACP Group (Babb and Babb 2006; Van Reisen 2012; Keijzer 2016). Crucially, these quarrels have made it difficult for the ACP Group to benefit from the knowledge that the ACP Secretariat has acquired in its frequent interactions with other international actors and to focus on generating ideas on more strategic matters beyond day-to-day activities (Lodge 2014). Furthermore, the ACP Secretary General, despite being vested with executive power, has largely limited its actions to management and personnel matters: this is a consequence of the fact that ACP ambassadors 'do not accept his role as a substantive representative of the ACP Group' (Okelo-Odongo 1985, 85), to the point that his status has been 'more that of Secretary than General' (Mailafia 2014, 236).

As for the unity and solidarity of the ACP Group, various cleavages have emerged over the years between various states or clusters of states, notably in relation to the benefits arising from the various ACP–EU agreements, the allocation of senior posts in the ACP Secretariat or, more generally, the relevance of the ACP Group. Specifically, the Caribbean and Pacific regions have conceived of the ACP Group as a vehicle to amplify their voice in international settings and as a shield from the dominating attitudes of regional powers in Latin America and Oceania, respectively. Within Africa, positions differ, and in some ways reflect post-colonial reflexes: states in West and central Africa have traditionally perceived the ACP Group as an instrument to preserve their historical connection with Europe and to profit from favourable trade and aid arrangements; states in east and southern Africa,

conversely, have been more lukewarm on the added value of the ACP Group beyond it being an aid-delivery mechanism, and have often perceived it as a potential obstacle to pan-Africanism and to the supranational aspirations of the AU (Carbone 2018, 2020). There have been less frequent clashes in relation to intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation, not least because discussions often stay at a very general level and do not go beyond lowest-common-denominator decisions (Interviews with OACPS Secretariat officials, March–May 2018 and March–May 2020). As cogently stated by a seasoned Pacific ambassador:

The ACP Group is neither a political union nor an economic entity. The former fact can be clearly appreciated in the stance adopted by some ACP countries when the Group as a whole is perceived to encroach into national affairs by strong proclamations of 'national sovereignty'. (Luteru 2013, 9)

### Survival threats and the birth of the OACPS

The urgency to undertake structural and operational reforms rose in the agenda of the ACP Group in the early 2010s (Gomes 2017), resulting in the establishment of two different working groups to articulate new directions beyond 2020: an Ambassadorial Working Group on Future Perspectives of the ACP Group appointed in November 2010 and headed by the future Secretary General Patrick Gomes, and an Eminent Persons Group established in March 2013 and chaired by former president of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo. Interestingly, both working parties called on the ACP Group to reposition itself to be more effective and relevant in the international arena and search for innovative sources to attain financial sustainability, yet they differed in their proposed reforms of the ACP Group's governance: the former recommended strengthening the role of the Committee of Ambassadors (ACP 2016), whereas the latter proposed to reinforce the technocratic role of the ACP Secretariat and the political and executive role of the Secretary General (2014) – and these divergent conclusions further increased the distrust between the two Brussels-based organs (Interviews with ACP ambassadors and with OACPS Secretariat officials, January–May 2020). Their work, however, informed the publication of a strategic document, *Towards the ACP We Want*, which proposed a new vision and rationale for the ACP Group in the twenty-first century, namely to 'become the leading transcontinental organisation working in solidarity to improve the living standards of our peoples through South–South and North–South cooperation' (ACP 2017, 3). It also underpinned the wide-ranging revision of the Georgetown Agreement: launched by the ACP Council of Ministers in November 2016, the ambition was to conclude the process by mid-2018, ahead of the negotiations of the post-Cotonou agreement (*InDepthNews*, 8 April 2018; Interviews with OACPS Secretariat officials, March–May 2018).

The fate of the ACP Group, in fact, was intertwined with the preparatory process of the successor to the Cotonou Agreement set to expire in February 2020. In December 2017, the European Commission launched a proposal, endorsed by the EU member states in June 2018, for a hybrid framework, which would preserve relations with the ACP Group but would create three regional pillars (Carbone 2019b). This proposal, which was justified by increased regionalisation across ACP states, was perceived as an attempt to further undermine the integrity of the ACP Group (Interviews with ACP ambassadors and with OACPS Secretariat officials, March–May 2018). An even more significant threat to the existence of the ACP Group came from the AU. In March 2018, the AU Executive Council adopted a

controversial decision, which stipulated Africa's intention to, on the one hand, adopt 'a single framework for cooperation from Union to Union/continent to continent, independently of the ACP–EU framework' and, on the other hand, conclude new agreements with Caribbean and Pacific states underpinned by South–South cooperation principles, again beyond the ACP structure (AU 2018a). The AU decision rested on two sets of arguments: first, the ACP Group has failed to advance human and social development in Africa, let alone economic growth; second, the ACP Group, portrayed as an emanation of the EU, has perpetuated donor–recipient dynamics (*The Bulletin of the Fridays of the Commission*, December 2015; *Euractiv*, 24 May 2018; Interviews with AU representatives, May 2018).

Seen by many as 'the end of the ACP Group' (Interview with OACPS Secretariat official, May 2018), the adoption of the AU decision was very controversial: it was skilfully orchestrated by the AU Commission, led by its chair Moussa Faki Mahamat and the then AU presidency, headed by Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, who wanted to strengthen the role of the AU in the international arena; it was opposed by a large majority of the African members of the ACP Group, particularly those in West Africa, who felt more comfortable operating within the ACP context; and it was reluctantly accepted by states in North Africa, who did not want to sacrifice their preferential arrangements with the EU (Interviews with ACP ambassadors and with AU representatives, March–May 2018). The intention was to present the AU decision in the ACP Council of Ministers of May 2018 in Lomé, but in that context, to use Faki Mahamat's words, there was a 'lack of unity on the African side' as most African states 'took the floor to recommend adherence with the ACP structure, in a tacit challenge to the principles contained in the African Common Position' (Faki Mahamat 2018, 39). The unusual clash between the ACP Group and the AU – or, rather between two clusters of ministers (foreign affairs in the AU context and finance or development in the ACP context) representing the same African countries (Carbone 2018) – slowed down the revision process of the Georgetown Agreement, as 'various African ambassadors wondered whether it was worth it continuing the reform exercise, if the ACP Group was no longer going to exist' (Interview with OACPS Secretariat official, April 2020).

As soon as the AU 'backtracked' from its previous decision (*Africa Confidential*, 26 October 2018),<sup>11</sup> work on the revision of the Georgetown Agreement accelerated, with proposals for amendments submitted by all ACP regions, and the creation of an editorial committee to produce drafts to be discussed in various sessions of the Committee of Ambassadors and of the Council of Ministers, before its formal adoption in Nairobi in December 2019 (*PINA*, 19 December 2019). One of the most important bones of contention concerned the 'nature of the beast' (Interview with African ambassador, January 2020). A large majority of states, with the Caribbean in the lead, supported the transformation of the ACP Group from a cluster of states vested with a limited legal personality into a proper international organisation (Interviews with OACPS Secretariat officials, March–May 2020). Significant resistance came from the Southern Africa region, principally South Africa, which sought to maintain the status quo: officially they stated that 'rather than expanding the scope or creating a new organisation, it was more important to make the existing one more efficient' (Interview with African ambassador, February 2020). Their real concern, however, was that 'the OACPS would gradually become a supranational organisation and would even legislate and impose decisions on ACP states to take actions at national level, but of course this is not the case' (Interview with Caribbean ambassador, April 2020).<sup>12</sup>

Similar dynamics emerged in relation to the global actorness of the OACPS. At one side was a variegated set of stakeholders, who wished the OACPS to act as initiator and coordinator of the demands of the developing world in international settings, considering the ongoing crisis of the G-77. In this sense, the view within the ACP Secretariat, with Secretary General Patrick Gomes being an ardent supporter, was that the OACPS could be the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of the Global South (*Jeune Afrique*, June 2019; *Jamaica Observer*, 11 December 2019; Interviews with OACPS Secretariat officials, March–May 2020). At the other side, a small cluster of actors, with South Africa once again leading, opposed any attempt to build capacity of the OACPS to have international presence: ‘their view was that it was not necessary to create parallel structures to the G-77 and to the various regional organisations in the three regions, essentially the African Union’ (Interview with Caribbean ambassador, February 2020). Eventually, an entire new chapter on foreign relations was added, stipulating that the OACPS may conclude international agreements with third parties, may seek to further develop its role in the United Nations, and may set offices in third states and in international organisations (ACP 2019).

A less divisive issue concerned the need to reduce the dependence of the OACPS from the EU (Interviews with ACP ambassadors and OACPS Secretariat officials, January–May 2020). Interestingly, it was the West Africa region that pushed strongly in this direction, ‘because they wanted to show to the AU and its supporters that the OACPS would be capable of acting autonomously from the EU’ (Interview with OACPS Secretariat official, March 2020; also Interviews with ACP ambassadors, January–May 2020). By contrast, representatives of the Caribbean and Pacific regions, albeit using different words and tones, sent a similar message: ‘We should look into the future, but we must not forget the past, and the EU has been and will always be our main partner’ (Interview with Pacific ambassador, May 2020). Eventually, all references to the EU and to the ACP–EU partnership were wiped out – with the exception of a generic mention in the preamble. The attempt to increase autonomy from the EU was linked to the search for financial sustainability. Indeed, not only a substantial portion of the operational costs of the OACPS Secretariat (between 40 and 50%) but also all funds for intra-ACP cooperation largely, if not entirely, have come from the EU – which has raised eyebrows from critical observers, who have hinted at some form of collusion between the OACPS Secretariat and the European Commission (Interviews with AU representatives, May 2018; see also *The Bulletin of the Fridays of the Commission*, December 2015). The establishment of an ACP Endowment and Trust Fund was momentous in that it allowed

the OACPS to be at the service of its members not only for the distribution of aid from its long-standing partner, the European Union, but also, for the first time, for the mobilisation of finance for large projects, and not only infrastructures. (Interview with OACPS Secretariat official, April 2020)

Other changes, though not as significant as those recommended by the Ambassadorial Working Group (ACP 2014) and the Eminent Persons Group (ACP 2016) link, concerned the institutional framework and the possible extension of the OACPS membership. The initial proposal submitted by the ACP Secretariat to create a Conference of Foreign Ministers was discarded as some ACP states feared an indirect expansion of the international profile of the OACPS. As a compromise, it was decided that the OACPS Council of Ministers should predominantly consist of ministers of foreign affairs, so as to avoid any possible clash between ministers of foreign affairs and other ministers, as had happened in 2018 (Interview with

OACPS Secretariat official, May 2020). More contentious was the prospect of enhancing the profile of the OACPS Secretary General, including by creating the post of Deputy Secretary General, tasked with day-to-day management of the OACPS Secretariat (Interviews with OACPS Secretariat officials and with ACP ambassadors, January–May 2020). This proposal was eventually rejected:

The official reason was the cost associated to the creation of a senior management post for an OACPS that was facing major financial difficulties; however, it was clear that many ambassadors simply did not want to boost the political profile of the Secretary General. (Interview with Pacific ambassador, December 2019)

Finally, a large majority of ACP states sought to preserve historical memory; thus, it was agreed to somehow maintain ACP in the official name of the rebranded organisation. Importantly, there was little appetite to extend membership beyond the three regions, a possibility that had been floated in the preparatory process, for fear of further diluting the nature and effectiveness of the OACPS (Interviews with ACP ambassadors, January–May 2020).

## Conclusion

The Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) – officially in force since April 2020 as a successor to the ACP Group – is one of the largest and most enduring international organisations in the world, with its membership growing to 79 states from the initial 46 when it was established in June 1975. Existing academic analyses have concentrated on its main *raison d'être*, which is the negotiation and management of the various ACP–EU agreements, specifically the different iterations of the Lomé Convention (1975–2000) and the Cotonou Agreement (2000–2021), and have taken an EU-centric approach. The nature and functioning of the ACP Group have been discussed only to ascertain how, over different periods, such a heterogeneous cluster of states has managed to extract more or less favourable provisions in the negotiations with the EU. This article, conversely, has focussed on the different types of initiatives that the ACP Group has taken to promote intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation. Specifically, it has shown how an inconclusive first decade (1975–1985) devoted to the operationalisation of intra-ACP cooperation was followed by a period of cooperation fatigue (1985–2000), whereby collective action was limited to the preservation of the preferential trade regime and the substantial aid allocations received from the EU – which were also the reasons for the widening of membership. The various attempts to (re) launch intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation since the early 2000s with the aim of strengthening the relevance and autonomy of the ACP Group have generated results that, with some exceptions, are somewhat below expectations.

The revised Georgetown Agreement, following a lengthy and participatory soul-searching exercise that preceded its adoption in December 2019, represents another sign of the willingness to reinvigorate a long-standing group of states, with stronger emphasis on self-awareness and financial sustainability. It introduced some important changes, but did not transform the ACP Group into a political international organisation effectively designed for ambitious collective action. The challenge of making the OACPS more 'fit for purpose' is linked, in large part, to the commitment of its member states. Historically, they have adopted grandiose statements manifesting a clear intention to establish the ACP Group as

a leading organisation of the Global South. Yet they have failed to create the appropriate institutional architecture and to mobilise resources (or, in some cases, even pay their statutory dues) for greater intra-ACP and extra-ACP cooperation. The birth of the OACPS may therefore be a last attempt to bridge this intentions-capability gap. However, most of the initial measures aimed at starting a transformation period – for instance, efforts towards the diversification of partners, the search for new financial resources, and the restructuring of the OACPS Secretariat – have been affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. Paradoxically – or perhaps not? – the most important achievement in the first year of life of the OACPS is the political deal reached on 3 December 2020 with the European Union for a successor to the Cotonou Agreement.<sup>13</sup> The new EU–OACPS Agreement, initialled in April 2021 and due to be signed in early 2022, demonstrates that the OACPS can successfully conclude a complex and comprehensive agreement and still effectively negotiate for the social and economic advancement of its member states, but at the same time reveals that the fate of the OACPS, like its predecessor, continues to be intrinsically linked to the European Union.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. This article uses the term 'European Union' (EU) to refer to the entity created by the Treaty of Maastricht of February 1992. For the sake of simplicity, it also refers to the European Economic Community (EEC), created by the Treaty of Rome of March 1957 and subsumed into the European Community (EC) by the Treaty of Maastricht as one of the three pillars of the EU.
2. The literature on ACP–EU relations is vast. For a review, see Carbone (2013, 2020) and Montoute and Virk (2017).
3. One of the main sources of information on the evolution of the ACP Group was *The Courier*. Published every two months between 1975 and 2003, it was funded through the European Development Fund and managed by the European Commission. It documented progress in ACP–EU cooperation, but mostly importantly it served to enhance the visibility and contributed to building the identity of the ACP Group. Unsurprisingly, its demise provoked discontent in the ACP Group. Relunched in 2007, it was managed by the ACP Secretariat but still funded through the EDF, until it stopped publication in 2011.
4. This expression was firstly used by Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere. However, Nyerere did not refer to the ACP Group, as often believed, but to the G-77: 'The Group of 77 developed out of a felt need for the Third World to speak with one voice at United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) conferences and other meetings concerned with world economic matters .... Ours is a kind of Trade Union of the Poor' (Nyerere 1979, 62, 64).
5. The negotiations of the EPAs have been a pervasive source of tension between the ACP Group and the EU, to the point that at the end of 2020 only two of the seven regional EPAs had come into force (Carbone 2020). It should be noted that the EPAs are self-standing

agreements, negotiated by individual ACP regions (or states), manifesting different levels of actorness and agency in their engagement with the EU. Nevertheless, the ACP Group has periodically raised concerns common to all EPAs, particularly with a view to enhancing their developmental dimension.

6. The 79 member states of the OACPS are grouped into six regions: Central Africa, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific.
7. The ACP Group has signed numerous cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding with various international organisations, which were in part attracted by the availability of funds for intra-ACP cooperation. The ACP Group has observer status in the United Nations and in other international and regional bodies: UN Habitat, WTO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), UNCTAD, the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Agence Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) and the Commonwealth Secretariat. It has technical agreements with the World Customs Organization (WCO), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the World Bank (Bradley 2004; Van Reisen 2012; Nono 2015).
8. The African, Caribbean and Pacific Information Centre for South–South and Triangular Cooperation was inaugurated in October 2018 in Malabo. It is an initiative of Equatorial Guinea’s President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who sees it as ‘the most salient token of Southern peoples and countries’ solidarity that is aimed at enhancing their respective autonomy and support their efforts to achieve the international Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) foreseen in the 2030 Agenda’ (*InDepthNews*, 15 August 2019).
9. The oft-cited words of former Director General of the WTO Pascal Lamy indicating that the ACP Group is ‘one of the more powerful and influential advocacy and negotiating arms in the WTO’ (cited in *Horizons*, June 2015, 10) may be somewhat exaggerated.
10. For instance, the OACPS does not coordinate in New York in view of UN meetings. Its members operate within other groupings, for example the African Union or the Alliance of Small Island States.
11. The solution, agreed upon in September 2018, was a two-track process for Africa’s relations with the EU: one through the AU, focusing on political relations at a continent-to-continent level; the other through the ACP Group, focusing on development aspects, mostly at a bilateral level (AU 2018b; Carbone 2019b).
12. Indeed, the ACP Group was transformed into OACPS, yet its power vis-à-vis its member states was largely left intact: as put by a Pacific ambassador, ‘we do not expect the revised Georgetown Agreement to guide bilateral relations between ACP states’ (Interview with Pacific ambassador, March 2020).
13. For an analysis of the main elements of the EU–OACPS Agreement, see Carbone (2021).

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