

Brussels, 14 January 2009

Petition TRAIDCRAFT

Dear Colleagues,

Over the month I have received a number of messages on Economic Partnership Agreements. I welcome these valuable contributions to the public dialogue and debate on EPAs.

During the preparation and negotiation of EPAs, we have organised or participated in a wide range of civil society dialogues with stakeholders and interested parties. A wide range of voices have been heard, and their views and comments taken into account.

Following the initialling of a number of agreements at the end of 2007, we have now signed a full EPA with Caribbean countries in the "CARIFORUM" regional grouping, and interim (goods-only) EPAs with Côte d'Ivoire and with Cameroon. We hope to be able to sign all initialled interim EPAs by early 2009 and to conclude and sign a fully-fledged EPAs later in 2009.

EPAs are development-oriented trade agreements that seek to take into account the specific needs of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. EPAs have the potential to support reform and change and to boost development and economic growth. They aim to encourage regional integration and seek to ensure that trade and economic growth go hand in hand with sustainable labour and environmental standards. And, last but not least, they put us and our ACP partners on safe legal ground, in terms of compliance with World Trade Organisation rules.

Change will not be abrupt. Trade in goods, for instance, will cover around 80% of local products for most countries and liberalisation will take place over lengthy periods of time. This will come with additional safeguards and derogations, while the EU will open its market completely. As far as other issues, such as services, investment, public procurement, intellectual property rights etc are concerned, we believe they can be important contributors to growth and development in the 21st century, helping to strengthen the rule of law and to attract investments and in the end boost trade. We remain committed to negotiating all outstanding issues with our ACP partners in an open and flexible way. Many of our partners share our view that these are important issues that should be addressed in the negotiations. Where they do not, there will be no question of forcing them to do so.

EPAs represent a change in our trade relations with ACP countries and regions, and I am confident we shall be able to reach agreement on outstanding issues in the months ahead. I look forward to continuing our discussion with civil society on these important issues.

Catherine Ashton