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The EU and 'Pro-Poor' Contributions to Sustainable Development in the Post-2015 Consensus

Langan, M.; Price, S.

The European Union (EU) has expressed a long-standing commitment to sustainable development, from the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam through to the current Europe 2020 strategy for sustainable development and inclusive growth. Commitment at a regional level has been matched by the role the EU has played at a global level, particularly in relation to the United Nations processes aimed at addressing climate change and the setting of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and their successor Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The creation of the latter targets was viewed by the European Commission as validation of its long-standing approach:

Sustainability is a European brand. The EU has a strong starting position and track record, with a high level of economic development, social cohesion, democratic societies and a commitment to sustainable development which is firmly anchored in the European Treaties ⁱ

This collection examines the role the EU has played in addressing and supporting the post-2015 consensus on sustainable development - through a discussion of the EU's trade and development policy, with a particular focus on its relations with the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States. The rationale for this focus is the longevity of the ACP-EU relationship, which has its roots in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, the founding Treaty of the European Economic Community. As such it is the EU's longest standing development cooperation relationship, which has undergone continual reform and renegotiation, from the Lomé Conventions, first signed in 1975 through to the present Cotonou Partnership Agreement and its associated Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). The renegotiations and ongoing liberalization of the relationship has placed pro-poor and poverty alleviation strategies at the centre of the ACP-EU partnership and therefore presents a useful lens through which to explore the contributions of the EU to sustainable development.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been warmly welcomed by donors, as well as major corporations involved in the UN Open Working Group (OWG), which helped devise the post-2015 agenda. In contrast to the preceding Millennium Goals, the SDGs are widely viewed as a pivot towards economic growth strategies tied to private sector development (PSD).ⁱⁱ Goal 8 and Goal 9, for instance, put a firm focus upon the creation of decent jobs and a business 'enabling environment'. Accordingly, the SDGs are regarded as a vital step towards the building of the economic base for social development, the stimulation of global markets – through improvements to the trade and competitive potential of developing countries – and a shared prosperity conducive to poverty reduction.

In contrast, however, there are a number of critical questions that have emerged to counter such a positive endorsement of the SDGs. First, whether this turn to PSD and growth is in fact something 'novel' in donor relations with developing countries. Much of donor praise for the SDGs omits recognition of how PSD and free market policies have been embedded within long-standing development strategies, whether in the time of the Millennium Goals, or further back to structural adjustment programmes.ⁱⁱⁱ Second, whether the enhanced

emphasis on growth strategies will lead to a further entrenchment of free market policies that can often be detrimental to the needs of poor and to producers and workers in developing countries. Third, in light of these concerns, whether a new and alternative model of development should be sought. Quintos^{iv} remarks that the SDGs have in fact mobilised civil society and progressive groups to push for a 'vision of a new development model to counter the neoliberal assault'.

It is in this context of controversies surrounding the SDGs and their 'pro-poor' growth agenda, that this collection examines the contributions of the European Union to sustainable development in African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. The European Commission has been one of the most vocal supporters of the SDGs. In fact the concept of sustainable development itself is said to be a European construct, one which demonstrates the EU's normative power in development agendas.

The eight contributions to this collection provide a holistic overview of EU sustainable development interventions across an array of thematic areas, including trade, climate change, civil society engagements, private sector development and Aid for Trade, joint parliamentary institutions, and regional integration. They bring together specialists on EU external relations, from a range of perspectives focused around political economy and development studies. Together they provide timely insight into EU trade and development policies in the context of the post-2015 Consensus and critically analyse the relationship between EU policy objectives and the material impact of its interventions.

The climate-development nexus, in which policies to address climate change are integrated into broader sustainable development frameworks, is explored by De Roeck, Delputte and Orbie^v through the analysis of climate adaption in the framing of EU development discourse. They identify three frames of adaption and find that the human security frame has a strong presence in the climate-development nexus within EU discourse, which translates to various notions of climate resilience. The growth frame presents climate change as a threat to sustainable development, provoking responses based on the creation of 'enabling environments' for investment and technologies, whilst the justice/equity frame emphasises inequitable distribution of climate-related impacts. Taken together De Roeck et al find that there is a bias towards global, top-down framing of climate change adaption, with little role for the agency of developing countries, local actors and civil society. This in turn prompts conclusions about the EU as a global actor in international climate change and development by highlighting its normative aspirations with a distinctly neo-liberal flavour. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of 'governmentality', De Roeck et al argue the prevalence of the top-down human security and growth frames act as discursive strategies for donors and international institutions to develop a centralised way to deal with climate change in development. In doing so, the structure of the relationship between the Global North and South is embedded, as Northern donors become responsible for the 'resilience' of the passive Southern aid recipients. The concept of resilience thus serves as a discursive tool for rolling out a neoliberal governmentality vis-a-vis the Global South, focused on individualisation and the 'disciplining of states, governments and elites' into accepting a neoliberal development paradigm.

From a historical materialist position, Price and Nunn^{vi} explore similar themes in the development of the ACP-EU relationship and argue that the concepts of sustainable development and poverty reduction are drawn on to legitimate the process of world market expansion. This, they argue, is a multi-scalar process that is further entrenched by the trade liberalisation underpinned by regionalisation projects. The ACP-EU relationship embeds a form of dependent development that is pro-market and that attempts to embed the world market in different national and regional ACP contexts. In developing their analysis of the ACP-EU relationship they position their own theoretical argument in contrast to the other major theoretical interpretations of the relationship: predominantly realist, constructivist, neo-Gramscian and Uneven and Combined Development (U&CD) perspectives. They conclude that reorganisation of the ACP-EU relationship into the EPA trade regime represents an attempt to ensure neo-liberalisation in the name of pro-poor and sustainable development. However, key to this analysis is a rebuttal of the idea that this will be a process of homogenisation and policy convergence, but rather one that produces 'variegated' responses that have been embraced and recognised by the EU.

Heron and Murray-Evans^{vii} also emphasise this variegation or 'unevenness' in the ACP responses to the EU's promotion of regional integration. They highlight the 'growing enthusiasm among EU policy-makers' for the promotion of regionalization in the ACP as a response to the pressures for the liberalization of the ACP-EU relationship. They argue that the variances in the ACP's national and regional responses are due to the degrees of congruence between the institutional development in existing regional projects with those prescribed by the EU. They develop an explanatory model based on the degrees of congruence in order to explain the variances in ACP responses to the EPAs, based on (i) coherence of the EPA group with existing regional institutions; (ii) compatibility of the EPA regional configurations with pre-existing customs union obligations; (iii) delegation of supranational negotiating authority; and (iv) the presence/absence of regional leadership. They conclude that the divergent ACP responses to the EU's attempts to promote regional integration will have consequences for both governance and development.

Delputte and Williams ^{viii} further the analysis of institutional factors within the ACP-EU relationship, through a particular exploration of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA). They take a deliberative approach to explore the parliamentary debate on the trade-development nexus through the EPA negotiations, in order to assess whether the JPA approaches the ideal type of an equal partnership. Through a focus on five key areas (participation, openness, common good, constructive politics and power neutralizing mechanisms) Delputte and Williams argue that real dialogue is not always guaranteed and that despite a rhetoric of 'equal partnership' the relationship remains asymmetrical. They conclude that ideas 'do not always travel in reciprocal directions' which questions the 'fundamentals of equal partnership between unequal regions'. For Delputte and Williams, it also raises questions about the power, impact and relevance of the JPA, and the broader rationale of the relationship that ostensibly seeks to 'discuss issues' and to 'facilitate greater understanding between the EU and the ACP'.

Keijzer^{ix} similarly expands this institutional focus via a broader analysis of the evolution and role of the ACP as a Group. The article, which draws on the literature on international organization, independence and performance, reviews the organizational formations of the Group and the ACP secretariat's development cooperation mandate. He argues that the

group has 'performed at a suboptimal level' and as such has failed to deliver on its supranational objectives. However, its member states have used their membership of the Group to access certain EU benefits, particularly important funding and patronage purposes. For Europe, meanwhile, the existence of the Group has allowed the EU to legitimize its differentiated treatment of its development cooperation partners. Keijzer concludes that the future of the ACP is 'more likely to be shaped by the outcome of the upcoming post-Cotonou negotiations with Europe than by its own independent actions'.

Orbie, Martens, Oehri and Van Den Putte^x explore the involvement of civil society actors in the sustainable development chapters of EU trade agreements. They highlight how the inclusion of these chapters creates institutionalised mechanisms for civil society participation which constitute an 'original and distinctively European approach' to the promotion of labour rights, environmental principles and economic development through trade. This, they argue, not only presents certain institutional shortcomings but also underpins a more fundamental critique that the inclusion of civil society mechanisms may legitimize the underlying free trade orientation of the agreement through the co-optation of critical actors. In the case of non-profit organizations, Orbie et al argue that their approach to participation can be characterized as both constructive and critical. They are 'walking a tightrope' between legitimizing free trade and obtaining results for the cause they represent whilst being critical of the civil society mechanisms, their limited impact and lack of substantive dialogue. Their approach therefore might not result in co-optation but possibly a more radical rejection of free trade agreements. Moreover, this underlines a divergence between non-profit and business organisations, with the latter being more positive about civil society mechanisms. Orbie et al posit that this might result in these mechanisms reinforcing the existing asymmetric power relations between business and non-profit organisations in trade policy influence, rather than balancing them in favour of sustainable development.

Questions of the legitimation of, and resistance to, trade liberalization strategies are further explored by Hurt^{xi} in his analysis of the incorporation of the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda into the EU's trade and development policies. He highlights how the Decent Work Agenda has become an increasingly central feature of the global development orthodoxy which is reflected in turn in the EU's trade policy and the EPAs. In an approach that focuses on the material interests and core neo-liberal assumptions central to the EU's trade agenda, Hurt argues that this incorporation provides a rhetorical justification for a policy approach that reflects the interests of European capital. The negotiations of EPAs have, however, encountered significant resistance from African trade unions, which have taken a critical stance against the EU's liberalization agenda. Hurt explores the prospects for transnational labour solidarity as a counter-hegemonic force. This, he argues, has been compromised in the past as the European Labour Movement has been more convinced by the inclusion of labour standards into the trade agreements. Hurt argues, however, that recently there has been more criticism of the EPAs by the European Labour Movement amidst more explicit solidarity with their African counterparts. As such trade unions play an important role within global sustainable development orthodoxy, either as legitimators of trade liberalization or as counter hegemonic actors resisting these forces and advancing a more transformative agenda.

Langan and Price^{xii} similarly point to the material gains for European corporate interests within the EU's pursuit of its sustainable development agenda. Their article focuses on the

EU's pro-poor Private Sector Development (PSD) objectives within the context of EPAs. Specifically, the authors focus on the West Africa EPA, EU relations with Ghana, and the 'pro-poor' prospects of the Ghanaian oil and cocoa sectors. They assess the contribution of these sectors to Ghanaian development, particularly in terms of a shift from the production of raw commodities to higher levels of value added activities. Moreover, they consider the likely impact of EU Aid for Trade provision for pro-poor PSD and socially equitable growth. The case studies reveal that despite the EU's discursive focus on poverty reduction, its material interventions do more to favour European headquartered corporations than to assist local businesses and citizens in Ghana.. While there have been some attempts to rebalance the economic gains, for example through Fair Trade programmes, questions remain about the success of these strategies. Langan and Price therefore raise fundamental questions about the EU's free market approach to sustainable development, and highlight how EU trade and aid interventions might in fact undermine pro-poor sustainable development goals.

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ⁱ European Commission. "Sustainable Development"

ⁱⁱ Koehler. "Seven Decades of 'Development' and now what?"; Mawdsley "Dfid , the private sector and the re-centering of an economic growth agenda"; Scheyvens et al. "The need to move beyond business as usual"; UN Global Compact. *SDG Compass*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Koehler. "Seven Decades of 'Development' and now what?"; Mawdsley "Dfid , the private sector and the re-centering of an economic growth agenda".

^{iv} Quintos. *The Post-2015 Corporate Development Agenda*, 14.

^v De Roeck et al. "Framing the climate-development nexus in the European Union"

^{vi} Nunn and Price. "Managing neo-liberalisation through the Sustainable Development Agenda"

^{vii} Heron and Murray Evans. " Regional encounters"

^{viii} Delputte and Williams. "Equal partnership between unequal regions?".

^{ix} Keijzer. "Feigned Ambition".

^x Orbie et al. "Promoting sustainable development or legitimizing free trade?".

^{xi} Hurt. "The EU's Economic Partnership Agreements with Africa".

^{xii} Langan and Price. "Oil and cocoa in the political economy of Ghana-EU relations".

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