

## **Promoting Stronger Trade and Investment in the Greater Caribbean Region: The ACS and Overseas Territories Relationship**



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The significant element of shared patrimony was a strategic pillar upon which the concept of the Greater Caribbean Region was founded. The Greater Caribbean Region is a political concept created to foster unity and promote cooperation among Member States. “This very concept, among the most inclusive one defining the area surrounding the Caribbean Sea, highlights common, historical, social and cultural characteristics of its Member States. Geographically, it is linked to the West Indies as well as several countries, in Central and South America.”

In 1994, leaders of the Greater Caribbean Region, in the face of the challenges posed by globalization and progressive liberalization, and in order to forge an effective and timely response to the opportunities presented within the world trading system, made the decision to create an organization which would serve as a bridge between the countries of the Caribbean. The Association of Caribbean States (ACS) “is a part of a second generation, modern, outward-looking integration organization that could build an economic bridge between the English speaking countries in the Caribbean and their Spanish, French, and Dutch speaking neighbours, creating what is now referred to as the Greater Caribbean. A history forged by the waters of the Caribbean Sea, and tides, which by virtue of descent are expected to bring us to shores of sustainable development

The essence of the ACS is primarily that of consultation and cooperation. Former Secretary General of the Association, Norman Girvan indicated that, “a close analysis of its nature and work programmes leads to the conclusion that it is a system of functional cooperation containing both

intra-regional and extra regional elements, and addressing both economic and non-economic subject areas. Hence we can argue that the proper characterization of the ACS is a Zone of Cooperation.” It is this most noteworthy feature or tenet (cooperation), of the ACS, which makes it a most relevant institution for the region, especially in this current dispensation of increased Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs).

The ACS with a membership of 28 countries is a key regional organization. It has been noted that in 1997, two short years after its establishment that the countries of the ACS represented “a population of 220 million inhabitants which represented 45.3% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), generating above 694 billions of dollars of gross domestic product, which was more than a third (34.3%) of that generated in the entire subcontinent.” (ACS Obstacles to Trade Study, 1999)

Also noteworthy is that the membership of the ACS includes as Associate Members the French and Dutch Overseas Departments (DOMs). France is an Associate Member on behalf of the overseas territories of: Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana St. Barthelmy and St. Martin, and the Kingdom of the Netherlands represents Aruba and Curacao. Historically, the interaction between DOMs, the EU Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs), and the rest of Greater Caribbean Region has been minimal. With the inception and within the realm of the ACS there has been a notable increase in the dialogue and cooperation with these States. The DOMs and OCTs have been visible as Members of the Association - at the level of Executive Boards of Special Committees, in the thematic programme areas of the ACS, and also in the execution of major initiatives and activities of the ACS Directorates.

Guadeloupe and Aruba have been the host and major partners in hosting the ACS Annual Business Forum of the Greater Caribbean, a flagship project of the Directorate of Trade Development and Economic Relations which provides entrepreneurs of the region with the opportunity to establish contacts with their counterparts through business meetings planned according to the interests of the participants, and also offers them an environment in which the main topics on the Region’s trade agenda can be discussed. The 6th Greater Caribbean Business Forum was held in Pointe a Pitre, Guadeloupe, on October 4-6, 2005, with 300 participants and 137 companies and institutions, while the 9th Business Forum of the Greater Caribbean, took place in Oranjestad, Aruba from September 23-25, 2008, under the theme- “Moving Forward Together: Greater Caribbean Visions for the Future”.

Cooperation activities and projects such as these have aided in strengthening the participation and presence of the States of DOMs and OCTs with the region. With the signing of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union, a new dimension is added to the picture and the strategic position of the ACS is once again brought to the fore as a space, where the countries of the region can dialogue as to areas of common interest to the benefit of development of Member States. It offers the countries of Cariforum and DOMs and OCTs the avenue through which existing cooperation efforts can be further strengthened and concretized not only for enhanced trade and investment opportunities but also to increase competitiveness and competitive advantage for regional stakeholders within the international system.

The prospective benefits that may be derived from this “Zone of Cooperation” will be gained dependent upon the extent to which functional cooperation, amongst ACS Members and Associate Members, complements and optimizes upon existing modalities and provisions with the EPA. One of the key provisions of the EPA is that of Development Cooperation, which is a primary feature infused throughout the agreement.

The provisions for Development Cooperation are contained in two areas Trade Partnership for Sustainable Development and Joint Declaration on Development Cooperation. It is the former which can be explored by Member States in order to address areas of convergence as it relates to the EPA and relevant ACS work programmes.

The space is therefore provided by the Association for giving opportunity and facility for Members States of the ACS who are also Members of the Cariforum grouping, along with those ACS Members who are a part of the DOMs and OCTs to work and cooperate on identified common priority areas and activities which have already been agreed upon within the ambit of the ACS, and are also supported within the development cooperation provisions and principles of the EPA, allowing States to reap optimum benefits.

The ACS as the umbrella organization covering countries surrounded by the Caribbean Sea requires that all make use of this tool in order to achieve our goals. Governments are encouraged to engage their interest in strengthening trade ties beyond the sub-regions, as well as strengthening institutions, macroeconomic coordination and improvement of infrastructure. There has been progress in the field of trade, there still remains more that can be done to have intra-regional consolidation of growth and development of the countries of the Greater Caribbean. The Association of Caribbean States is strategically positioned to be a key supporter all Member States of the Greater Caribbean in this regard.

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