

Caribbean Civil Society Unites to Tap EU Development Funds

By Peter Richards

BRIDGETOWN, Barbados, Aug 23, 2010 (IPS) - Roosevelt King, the secretary general of the Barbados Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (BANCO), believes that Caribbean governments have dropped the ball when it comes to their commitment to support the initiatives of civil society.

He says their lack of commitment dates back to the Cotonou Agreement that was signed in 2000 and regarded as the framework for the European Union's relationship with the 79 countries of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) regions.

"If you look at the handbook for non-state actors, you will see that our governments have done absolutely nothing to allow us to reach that level of participation," King told IPS ahead of the first ever meeting of civil society organisations from across the Caribbean, which are seeking to develop a proposal to access assistance from the European Development Fund (EDF).

"At least, I should say they have taken us to the threshold but are not allowing us to cross. If it were not for the active vigilance of the EU to ensure that their Euros are properly spent to achieve development through cooperation, we would still be out to sea," he said.

"Our governments have a mandate to allow us to participate in the country strategy paper (CSP) and the national indicative programme (NIP). To explain these documents in a nutshell, the CSP is like an assessment paper and the NIP is a plan of action listing the main focal areas for funding and a budget for executing the programme. These strategies also exist at the regional level," he added.

The Aug. 19-20 meeting was an initiative of the Non-State Actors Advisory Panel of Barbados (NSA) and brought together delegates from similar NSAs in the nine-member Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States.

While no such panels exist in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica or Guyana, BANGO said it had been able to identify representatives from Jamaica and Trinidad to attend the meeting that also served to combine efforts with the Caribbean Policy Development Centre, which was mandated to hold a regional meeting with NGOs, labour and private sector representatives.

"The panels may become the saviour for Caribbean civil society, since our governments have not responded positively enough to initiatives by civil society to organise themselves," said King, adding that Barbados is the only CARICOM country to have an NGO as its focal point - BANGO - while all the others have government departments as their civil society focal points.

The Barbados meeting was intended to design a civil society proposal for the regional indicative programme between the European Commission and CARIFORUM (Caribbean Forum). Organisers said that the initiative will also serve to widen inputs from the Caribbean.

"We will access the funds. The only way we will not access the funds is if we do not get the proposal together. The funds are there for us. What we wanted to do (at the meeting) was to have more national representation so that the proposal will be wide," said King.

He told IPS that the proposal will be about building the capacities of the organisations to support national and regional development and will have two dimensions.

"First, nationally and then sectors. Remember that the sectors are NGOs, private sector and labour ...and the regional programme is based on collective national needs in these three sectors," he explained.

First Counsellor of the delegation of the European Union to Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, Robert Baldwin, said at the meeting that one of the innovations of the Cotonou Agreement was an increased emphasis on the role of civil society, "the need to give it a voice and also to fully involve it in EU-ACP cooperation".

But he acknowledged that although the accord encourages this type of involvement, "it is not in every region that such involvement is readily encouraged and assisted by the countries of the region."

"This is therefore an exceptional opportunity for Caribbean civil society to improve its own coordination, develop its medium-term strategy, improve its involvement in regional cooperation and build its own capacity," he said.

Baldwin said the Barbados meeting would be tasked with drawing up "the broad lines of such a programme, indicating how the coordination will operate, the main lines of the strategy and the proposed actions so that subsequent work on finalising input to the project identification currently being undertaken by the CARIFORUM Secretariat may be finalised in September."

CARIFORUM, which consists of the 15-member Caribbean Community (CARICOM) grouping and the Dominican republic, has already developed a road map for the use of the 165 million Euros (209.7 million dollars) allocated to the 10th EDF Caribbean Regional Indicative Programme that sets out the main areas of use of these EU funds, in particular, the Caribbean Economic Partnership Agreement and to regional integration issues such as the CARICOM Single Market and Economy.

Within the component dealing with social development, it has earmarked just over four million Euros (5.08 million U.S. dollars) to civil society and has named four regional bodies, including the Caribbean Association of Industry and Commerce, the Caribbean Congress of Labour and the Caribbean Policy Development Centre, to develop the content of the programme for civil society.

Representatives of these four organisations were present at the two-day meeting, but the organisers noted that "CARIFORUM wants one proposal from these actors collectively rather than four".

Baldwin agrees that coordination of the large number of interested actors will be particularly challenging. "One should also avoid the temptation to set up a too ambitious and costly coordination structure that cannot be sustained once the current funding has been used," he warned the delegates. (END)

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