

# Going Regional

The civil society contemplates the coming of the Eastern Africa common market.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN EASTERN AFRICA IS bracing for the arrival of a common market spanning five countries and 110 million people. The Eastern Africa Common Market (EACM) will bring together Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi into the most ambitious regional integration project in this side of the world since the demise in 1967 of the First East Africa Community.

The prospects of the common market are high. Already there is a Customs Union in place, itself an upgrading of a revived East Africa Community that has been in place since November 1999. Negotiations are gathering steam among the five countries to beat a June 2009 ratification deadline and a June 2010 formal launch date.

Significantly, the negotiations for the common market have drawn in the participation of several major non-state stakeholders, among them the civil society. Recent deliberations on the common market in Nairobi, Kenya, for instance, saw the participation of representatives of the region's academics, business organizations, the region's farmer umbrella organization and civil society, alongside government departments from the five countries.

## **Soul Searching**

An indication of the civil society's perspective of the common market

### **Regional Conference on Capacity Building for Fast Tracking of the East African Common Market**

This *Policy Brief* is one of four policy summaries derived from the deliberations and recommendations of a conference of policy-makers and other key stakeholders from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi that was held in 29-30 January 2006. The conference was organised by the Nairobi Resource Centre of CUTS International to discuss pathways and milestones towards achieving an East African Common Market. The farmers' perspective was presented to the conference by the Eastern Africa Farming Federation which brings together the national farmer federations from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Other stakeholders at the conference included national Chambers of Commerce and various private sector lobbies from the proposed Eastern Africa Common Market (EACM), researchers and academics, government representatives; regional bodies; national business organizations; competition authorities, boards of investment; and the civil society. Also present were representatives from development agencies, donors, and the media.

can be garnered from the deliberations of the Nairobi Conference. (See box elsewhere in this page for details on the Conference).

First, the civil society is in agreement with virtually all other stakeholders in regard to the suitability and utility of a regional common market. Regional integration enhances genuine participation of the people in the process of economic governance by creating an enabling political environment to monitor debt and promotes full economic accountability of governments. The overwhelming view is therefore that the region stands a far better position as an integrated common market as this will better address their individual small market sizes and put them in a strong bargaining position with the more powerful economies. The consequent benefits of economies of scale will moreover attract foreign investments through the enlarged market frontiers.

The civil society is also looking at the advent of a common market as an opportunity to reconfigure the sector into a more effective agent of social change. It was noted, for instance, that very few civil society organizations focus exclusively on trade, and most lack capacity to engage effectively in trade issues. Most have wide mandates which limit them from building capacities in one area. The low capacity is accentuated by resource constraints as many civil society organizations depend on unreliable and often conditioned grants from foreign benefactors. The advent of a common market in the region, it was felt, requires that the civil society begins confronting such problems in earnest.

The common market is also being viewed as added impetus for the sector to cultivate better relationships with the region's authorities. Generally, it was felt that current relationship with state actors continues to be bad and reactive. Since civil society plays an advisory as well as a complimentary role to the government, there is need to modulate their engagement with the government so as to know when to advice, compliment and even criticize.

### The Civil Society and the East Africa Community

The current East Africa Community treaty –to which the common market will be added - spells out opportunities for the civil society, as:

- Promotion of a conducive environment for the participation of civil society in the development objectives of the community.
- Promotion of dialogue with the civil society at the national and community level to facilitate improved business environment for the implementation of agree decisions in all economic sectors.
- Enabling entrepreneurs to engage interactively in improving the policies and activities of the institutions of the community that affect them so as to increase their confidence in policy reforms. Promoting the maximization of resource utility.

Evolving the networks and modalities to enable civil society organizations in the partner states to contribute effectively to the development of the community. The Treaty further identifies the roles that civil society could be involved in as including:

Ensuring that the community abides by the objectives as set out in the treaty.

As regards the pace and modality underpinning the establishment of the common market, the civil society is of mixed feelings. On the one hand, there is acknowledgement of the work done and, particularly, the decision by the member government to involve non-state actors in these early stages. On the other hand, there are areas of concern to the civil society. Key problem areas highlighted by the civil society include:

**Dangers of Fast-Tracking:** The civil society is apprehensive – as, apparently, are other non-state actors – of the fast tracking of the integration process. The fear is that the fast-tracking of economic integration is neglecting political aspects which are just as critical to a successful common market. Political angles on the integration appear to be short-term instead of long-term. It is the sector's view therefore that that integration, though heavily dependent on economic considerations, should not be being left to the mercies of market forces.

**Lack of peace in the region:** The fact that some parts of the region, particularly northern Uganda and the north-western Kenya, are historically restive and troubled. The process of integration thus requires factoring in the need to resolve outstanding pockets of insecurity.

**Information Deficiency:** information on the specifics of regional integration has not sufficiently reached the people of the region. There is therefore a need to forge networks that would facilitate information sharing and dissemination on the integration process. This would address the issue of information gap especially at the grassroots.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Still, the civil society would appear persuaded that the problems are manageable.

As a first step, the sector recommends that the integration process should provide avenues and structures to enable the participation. As it is, the integration process calls for their participation without setting specific structures to actualize the intention. The civil society also proposes that:

### **Civil Society should engage MPs**

There is need for the civil society to engage parliamentarians more - since they are the policy makers - to ensure that the policies address the interests of the general public. Further, the civil society groups' participation need to be backed by evidence-based research rather than mere participation

### **Involve the Trade Unions More**

The trade unions should be involved more in the process of integration especially in addressing possible side-effects of a common market such as job losses and unemployment.

### **Enhance capacity all round**

There is need for capacity enhancement at all levels, both at the integration level and at the level of individual civil groups.

This should encompass all requirements of the integration process - conceptualization of ideas, implementation and monitoring of the protocol.

### **Restrain some market forces**

The integration process should be market oriented but with strategic government interventions to curb potential disparities.

### **Review the Timeframe**

The timeframe for political federation should be reviewed so as to achieve political federation before economic federation. Specifically, the timeframe should be as follow:

- i. 2007-2012:** Publicity and mobilization;
- ii. 2012:** popularly elected EAC parliament and should make the constitution;
- iii. 2015:** A constitution is in place and the rotation of presidency starts;
- iv. 2020:** Unified presidency.