



The Relevance of the Caribbean in the European Union (EU) – Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) strategic bi-regional partnership

*by Annita Montoute**

This short piece discusses the relevance of the Caribbean¹ in the European Union (EU) - Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) strategic bi-regional partnership (thereafter, the Strategic Partnership), and the challenges it faces in this framework. The article argues that the engagement of the Caribbean subregion in the Strategic Partnership depends very much on its participation in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the EU's counterpart for the Strategic Partnership.

The Caribbean grouping adds much value to EU-LAC relations. First, the Caribbean carries diplomatic weight. By virtue of its numerical strength, the Caribbean could increase the visibility and influence of CELAC in its engagement with the EU, and any EU-LAC alliance in international fora, in cases where joint action is being taken.

Second, the Caribbean adds legitimacy to discussions of certain matters in which CELAC and the EU engage. One such issue is climate change. Given that Caribbean territories are Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the subregion could add more weight to the wider LAC region's international lobbying efforts to access funding for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The Caribbean can also speak with authority on, and influence issues relating to SIDS development.

Third, Caribbean states physically located on the South American continent – Belize, Suriname and Guyana – which hold membership in Latin American integration processes are helping to close the relational gap even further between the Caribbean and Latin American subregions, thereby strengthening the Strategic Partnership. The above view assumes that a cohesive CELAC is essential for a strong Strategic Partnership with the EU.

Fourth, Caribbean countries possess an abundance of natural resources particularly sea and marine resources and fertile agricultural land. Guyana is an example of the latter. With adequate funding, these resources could be explored and developed via joint ventures with Latin American countries and the EU.

Fifth, there are some areas in which the Caribbean's expertise can be valuable in its substantive engagement with Latin America and the EU. For example, in the area of agriculture, Trinidad and Tobago is a centre of excellence for cocoa production and Barbados has a sugarcane breeding facility where superior varieties of sugarcane are

¹ The Caribbean refers to the Forum of the Caribbean Group of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) States (CARIFORUM). CARIFORUM consists of 17-member states, 15 from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), plus Cuba and the Dominican Republic.



developed. The EU's science and technological advancement and innovation can be harnessed to boost relevant sectors and develop new areas of economic activity.

Sixth, the Caribbean holds an important key to the security of Latin America and the EU. By virtue of the Caribbean's location between the production of, and destination points for illegal drugs, the Caribbean is invaluable to Latin America's and the EU's national security. By deepening collaboration and strengthening relevant Caribbean institutions and systems, the sub region could play a substantial role in restricting the production and flow of illicit drugs from Latin America to Europe. This role does not only apply to physical drug interdiction but also to the prevention of money laundering and related criminal activities.

Seventh, Caribbean countries possess a highly educated population, a history of outstanding leaders in the international arena and a legacy of excellent diplomatic representation on the global stage. This could serve well in leveraging CELAC's positions and joint positions with the EU and in global fora.

The Caribbean's engagement in EU-LAC relations is not without challenges. First, the relative elevated economic importance of Latin America vis-à-vis Caribbean to the EU; Latin America being more attractive for FDI and trade. Caribbean interests and agenda face the risk of 'diminishing' in the wider LAC framework.

Other challenges faced by the Caribbean in the Strategic Partnership stem from the Caribbean's perception of, and its participation in the CELAC framework. Selected challenges are outlined below. First, CELAC was seen by some Caribbean countries as potentially competing with existing institutions such as the Association of Caribbean States. Second, the wide scope of CELAC's agenda. One outcome of this is a high number of meetings, which results in an overburdened schedule for Caribbean member states. This is not only time-consuming, but it also places a huge human resource and financial cost on the Caribbean that they cannot afford. Third, uncertainty about CELAC's leadership. There are questions about which of the regional powers in Latin America will/could provide sustained leadership for CELAC. It is noteworthy that since CELAC's formation, it is the relatively smaller countries that have held the Chair of the organisation. This does not encourage the Caribbean's confidence in CELAC's sustainability and by extension its external partnership frameworks.

Many of the challenges identified relate to CELAC's status as a young organisation in its early stage of evolution. The Caribbean has much potential for adding value and engaging with CELAC and in the Strategic Partnership from a position of strength and not weakness.

***Annita Montoute** is a lecturer at the Institute for International Relations at the University of the West Indies.



| This paper was prepared for the EU-LAC Foundation's Newsletter on the theme "Why should Latin America and the Caribbean be important to the European Union and why should the European Union be important to Latin America and the Caribbean?". This article gives the views of the author, and not necessarily the position of the EU-LAC Foundation.