

Mandelson in disarray over trade talks

As more and more groups criticise the European Union's approach, Trade Commissioner Mandelson finally admits it may not be possible to sign Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) this year.

31 October 2007

With only a few weeks remaining until the deadline, the European Commission has issued a statement saying that it will be virtually impossible to agree a full EPA for all countries by the end of the year. But it still hopes to agree deals on some products.

The move comes in response to recent requests for more time to conclude the deals by several African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, worried about the headlong rush into signing deals that could be highly damaging to their economies.

The West African region has formally asked for an extension of the deadline at a recent meeting in the Ivory Coast, saying "the importance of the activities which are still to be achieved do not allow the conclusion of a comprehensive and balanced agreement."

Ablasse Ouedraogo, their chief advisor, added: "West Africa isn't ready to sign such an agreement by 31 December."

The Seychelles have called for an alternative scheme that would let them continue selling their goods into the European market without having to open their own markets in return, a move championed by Traidcraft.

However, despite the deals being called "partnership agreements", Mandelson has flatly refused the West African request and not even replied to the Seychelles. He continues to insist that they must agree a basic EPA by the end of the year.

Turning up the heat

On 27th September, the fifth anniversary of the start of talks, thousands of campaigners, workers and farmers took part in events around the world demanding that the unfair deals are stopped. In a sign that the pressure is working, Mandelson sent an open letter to campaigners, defending his actions and saying that he has no legal alternative [an argument that is hotly contested by legal experts](#).

On top of this an increasing number of groups are calling on the Commission to allow more time for the negotiations so that deals can be worked out that actually support efforts to fight poverty in ACP countries. They include statements from the World Bank, the Trade Union Congress in Britain and a network of trade specialists from across Africa.

In the face of this opposition, Commissioner Mandelson's position is becoming more and more untenable. It is vital that we keep up the pressure in these critical final weeks.