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Images of the EU in EPA negotiations: Angel, demon - or just human?

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Abstract

A striking feature of the discourses surrounding the negotiations of Economic Partnership Agreements between the EU and developing states is the starkly contrasting pictures given of the role and nature of the EU. The Union is either portrayed as an angel, an actor with altruistic objectives, concerned primarily with the economic and social development of the ACP countries, or as a demon, an actor driven by self-interest with an hidden agenda and using confrontational tactics. The first image is mainly held by Commission officials, the second by NGO representatives. In this article, I establish the existence of the two contrasting images, try to explain theoretically the nature of the debate by reference to cognitive theory, and discuss the potential consequences of constructing and utilizing black-and-white images. I argue that the EU risked being caught in rhetorical traps by describing itself in overly altruistic terms, thereby giving its counterparts argumentative advantages. NGOs, on the other hand, lost some of their possibilities of influencing EU policy by taking a totally confrontational stance.

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1. Introduction [↑]

After six years of bargaining between the European Union (EU) and six regional groupings of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, more or less comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) were signed between the EU and some of the ACP regions/countries in November/December 2007. European Commission (primarily Directorate-General Trade) and ACP member state officials carried out the actual negotiations, with EU member states and ACP home governments controlling the process. Several European as well as non-European Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were also heavily engaged in the process, as lobbyists, advocates and critical observers.

When studying the discourses surrounding the process, a striking feature is the starkly contrasting pictures given of the role and nature of the EU, its goals, ambitions and negotiating behaviour. The Union is either portrayed as an angel, an actor with altruistic objectives, concerned primarily with the economic and social development of the ACP countries, or as a demon, an actor driven by self-interest with an hidden agenda and using confrontational tactics. The first image is mainly held by Commission officials, the second by NGO representatives and some ACP spokespersons. In the debate there was apparently no room for more nuanced versions of EU behaviour.

The purpose of the article is to explore the reasons for and consequences of having a policy debate that is so clearly painted in black and white. I establish the existence of the two contrasting images and try to explain theoretically the either-or nature of the debate by reference to attribution theory and other cognitive constructs, such as belief perseverance and cognitive consistency. I furthermore venture that constructing and utilizing consistently one-sided images has potential negative consequences, both for the Commission and for NGOs. I argue that the EU risked being caught in rhetorical traps by describing itself in overly altruistic terms, thereby giving its counterparts argumentative advantages. NGOs, on the other hand, lost some of their possibilities of influencing EU policy by taking a totally confrontational stance.

The article is mainly based on official material from EU webpages, primarily speeches by relevant EU Commissioners, and on web-based NGO material. Documents and comments found on the European Centre for Development Policy Management's webpage (see <http://www.acp-eu-trade.org/epa>) and its Trade Negotiations Insights have been especially helpful. I have also used data from in-depth interviews with five Commission officials, and with four NGO representatives in Brussels, carried out – mainly for other research purposes – between June 2006 and June 2007.

2. Two contrasting images of the EU [↑]

In this section I demonstrate the existence and lay down the fundamental traits of the two competing and contrasting images (Cottam 1994; Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995) of the EU found in the EPA debate. These constructs do not necessarily represent the views of any one concrete actor, but mirror the two ‘typical’, logically coherent representations found in the empirical material. To conclusively establish the black-or-white nature of the debate, I make extensive use of quotes from participants in the debate. For each image, I start by illuminating the ambitions and goals ascribed to the EU. Next, I delineate what interests that are claimed to drive EU policies. This is followed by a description of what is said to characterize EU strategies and tactics. Finally, I address whether the Union is seen as a homogeneous or a divided actor.

2.1. The EU as an angel [↑]

‘No set of developing countries has ever received an offer and a basis for a trade agreement like that from any source, at any time, anywhere in the world’. (Peter Mandelson, EU External Trade Commissioner; 2007d)

According to EU Commission, in this case primarily DG Trade and its Commissioner, Peter Mandelson, the EPA negotiations are a very special kind of negotiations, in which the EU is not acting as in ‘traditional’ trade negotiations. In Mandelson’s words, ‘the EPAs are not typical, hard nosed free trade agreements. I see them as tools for development and the promotion of regional economic integration’ (Mandelson 2005b; cf. 2007a; 2007b; interviews 1, 4). The main difference is that EPA negotiations are not, according to the Commission, about promoting EU self interests. While ACP region will open their markets to and among themselves, and the EU will remove fully all tariffs and quotas on ACP exports, the Union is ‘not seeking commercial advantage’ (Mandelson 2005c; cf. interview 5). As ‘Europe trades very little with ACP countries we don’t have any offensive commercial interests in these negotiations’ (Mandelson 2007a): ‘our EPA agenda is emphatically not about opening markets to our own exports’ (Mandelson 2005d). At the same time, Mandelson and other DG Trade officials take care to emphasize the development aspect of EPAs (interviews 1, 4, 5). Liberalizing trade flows must be part of a broader agenda, where the EU supports ‘the expansion of supply capacity, the removal of bottlenecks which cripple trade and industry, better governance, stability and transparency, and of course infrastructure’ (Mandelson 2005c). EPAs aim to be ‘pro-development, pro-reform instruments’ (Mandelson 2005d) and ‘are about using trade to support development’. EPAs are furthermore, it is asserted, backed by a very substantial development assistance package (Mandelson and Michel 2006). Mandelson proclaims that his ‘driving mission as Commissioner is to put trade at the service of development and to ensure /that/ the needs of the poorest are at all times at the forefront of our European policy’ (2005b).

The stated goals of the EU in the EPA process are to encourage a process of ‘economic reform, regional integration and progressive trade opening’ (Mandelson 2007b; cf. 2005e) that will lead to a ‘new partnership’ that can support the ACP partners ‘in seizing the benefits of progressive integration into the global economy while maintaining and renewing the unique ties that bind the EU and ACP’ (Mandelson 2007b; cf. EU Press Release 2007). Behind these goals lie some over-arching principles that seem to guide DG Trade: a belief in the developmental potential of free trade and liberalism, combined with an equally strong belief in the benefits of regional integration, stemming from the EU’s own experience. According to Mandelson, ‘My overall philosophy is simple: I believe in progressive trade liberalisation. I believe that the opening of markets can deliver growth and the reduction of poverty’ (2005b; cf. 2005c). Regional integration, meanwhile, will build markets where economies of scale and enhanced competition stimulate employment and development (Mandelson 2005c).

A new relationship with the ACP countries is necessary, both because the existing trade and aid system has not worked (Mandelson and Michel 2007b) and because the current arrangement with special preferences for the ACPs ‘is not right morally nor compatible with international trade rules’ (Mandelson and Michel 2007b). WTO compatibility is seen as essential, as ‘abiding by multilaterally agreed, equitable rules is

good for development' (Mandelson 2005b): 'The European Commission cannot maintain illegally a regime that we jointly promised to bring to an end seven years ago' (Mandelson and Michel 2007a; cf. interviews 2, 4).

In the process, the EU follows a path of persuasion and dialogue. There is 'absolutely no question of arm twisting' ACP governments into signing agreements they do not want (Mandelson 2007c). Threats and pressures are not on the agenda (cf. Mandelson and Michel 2007b; interview 3). Market openings must be 'properly sequenced and adapted to development situations and needs' (Mandelson 2005b) and the ACP countries will be able to 'protect and exclude sensitive products and take advantage of long transition periods to nurture growing industries and protect fragile agricultural sectors' (Mandelson and Michel 2007b; cf. Mandelson 2007b). The new partnership should underpin a reform process 'owned and managed by ACP countries' (Mandelson 2007b).

Commission spokespersons emphasize the homogeneity of the EU. The Commissioners for trade and development often issue joint statements and write joint letters where they explain the EU's standpoints (e.g. Mandelson and Michel 2006). According to interviewees from both DGs, the relationship between them is 'excellent' and DG Development is involved in EPA negotiations on a daily basis (interviews 3-5). The joint ambition of the two Directorates General to ensure that development support translates into capacity building is underlined (Mandelson 2005a; 2005d), implying that DG Trade is no less concerned with development objectives than is DG Development.

The defenders of the EU position not only vividly delineate the advantages of the Union's approach; they also verbally attack their critics. Those who suggest that EPAs are a danger to development 'are not only wrong. They also undermine those in Africa and other ACP countries who are seeking to work constructively for economic reform [...]'. This means that they are 'playing poker with the livelihoods of those we are trying to help' (Mandelson and Michel 2007b). Mandelson also warns NGOs that their 'campaigning zeal' may lead them to 'oppose innovation' (2005d).

To summarize, the adherents of the angel image – situated most often in the EU Commission – present a picture of the EU as a consistently benign partner, concerned with the well-being of the poorer countries. Development and free trade are seen as complimentary goals: liberalizing trade and enhancing regional economic integration automatically leads to less poverty. Critics that claim that the EU is driven by commercial self-interests are 'simply wrong' and 'caught in an ideological straitjacket' (Mandelson 2007d).

2.2. The EU as a demon

'The most unequal trade negotiation in history began three years ago [...] EPAs [...] could unleash a development disaster ... threatening jobs, industries, government revenues and public services in some of the poorest countries in the world.' (Open letter to Mr Mandelson from Civil Society Organizations – The Guardian 2005b)

In the eyes of most development NGOs, the EU has a 'self-serving trade and investment liberalisation agenda' (The Guardian 2005a) behind its development friendly rhetoric. Texts produced by the Commission are claimed to reflect 'the Commission's approach to global trade' and not 'the interests and needs of ACP countries' (Terraviva 2007a) and this approach is 'aggressive and neo-mercantilist', mirroring EU offensive trade interests (Jessop 2007; cf. Stop EPAs 2006; ACP Council of Ministers 2005). Commission negotiators are not really interested in ACP development (interviews 6, 8). According to one African NGO representative, the EU 'has lured countries into EPAs by promising them that there would be development programmes. That is a lie from the beginning – there will be no development programmes ... and there is no new money there' (Terraviva 2007b; cf. Oxfam 2007). Thus, the EU may sound and appear generous, but is not genuinely concerned with ACP development. Rather, commercial self-interests are in this view the driving forces behind EU behaviour (Christian Aid 2007; Trade Unions 2007; interviews 6, 8, 9).

If EPA negotiations lead to an agreement, according to the Union's plans, the consequences for the ACP

countries' economies and jobs will be dire (Trade Unions 2007; cf. interview 6). Under the proposed EPAs, 'farmers and producers in many of the world's poorest countries will be forced into direct and unfair competition with efficient and highly subsidised EU producers; regional integration amongst ACP countries will be severely undermined; ACP governments will lose substantial revenue along with many of the policy tools they need to support economic and social development' (Oxfam 2006). This will 'lead to deeper unemployment, loss of livelihoods, food insecurity and social and gender inequality as well as undermine human and social rights' (Stop EPAs 2006).

From the beginning, development NGOs claim that the Union negotiators have not taken their ACP counterparts' concerns and demands seriously and have ignored ACP proposals (interview 8). The Commission has been unwilling to discuss alternatives to EPAs (interviews 6, 8, 9). The EU's proposals are considered 'utterly unfair' (ActionAid 2005), reflecting the highly asymmetric strength of the negotiating parties: 'Europe, with its overwhelming economic and political power, and the fragile and dependent economies of the ACP countries' (Stop EPAs 2006). The negotiation process is correspondingly 'imbalanced and rushed, allowing the EU to impose its interests and agenda, and dictate the momentum of the negotiations to suit its own needs and purposes' (Stop EPAs 2006), while the African countries have been 'reduced to "begging" in negotiations' (Terraviva 2007a).

EU tactics and strategies have been aggressive (Jessop 2007). It has taken recourse to 'bullying tactics' (KCSA 2007; Terraviva 2007a) and used 'shabby tricks' (Christian Aid and Traidcraft 2007). The 'dirtiest trick' is 'the spurious insistence on a December deadline' (ibid): the EU's frequent references to a deadline, caused by the end of a WTP waiver allowing preferential EU treatment of the ACP, at the end of 2007, and its firm insistence that the only alternative to an EPA agreement is competing on the same terms as all other developing countries, are seen as veiled threats, putting pressure on ACP governments to sign a deal that are not in their interests (Christian Aid 2007; Oxfam 2007). This behaviour 'is simply not coherent with the EU's claim to be interested in a just and balanced partnership' (Trade Unions 2007). Furthermore, the promises of aid for trade 'is a myth' (Trade Unions 2007). The EU 'has encouraged false hopes of increase in European development assistance [...] and used different forms of pressure, including aid conditionality, to continue to override the reluctance of ACP groups to yield to its interests' (Stop EPAs 2007; cf. interview 8).

In brief, the adherents of a demon image see the EU as an 'enemy' (on enemy images, see Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995), driven by neo-mercantilism and a will to promote its export interests. All its declarations expressing development concerns are labelled as rhetoric. To get an agreement reflecting its interests, it has put undue pressure on ACP governments, utilizing threats and 'dirty tricks'. The consequences for the ACP countries of such an EPA agreement will be disastrous.

3. Interpreting the nature of the debate [↑]

When reading the descriptions made of the EU's role in EPA negotiations in NGO discourse and in the official Commission discourse, respectively, it is sometimes hard to believe they are talking about the same actor. In this section, I analyse and try to explain how a prominent actor's motives, goals and behaviour can be interpreted in two so completely different ways. To do so, I refer to a variety of cognitive theories linked to belief systems and images (Jervis 1976; Jönsson 1990; Vertzberger 1990).

It is obvious that the two ideal images described above rely on and depart from two widely differing definitions of the situation (Snyder et al. 1962), most notably concerning worldviews and causal beliefs (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). At the bottom, those who see the EU as an angel picture the international system basically as composed of sovereign and autonomous states, which can negotiate as equals. They strongly believe in the benefits of globalization, a neo-liberal world economy and of free trade. A liberalization of trade flows leads to economic growth, and economic growth leads to development. This holds true both for developed and developing countries, though weaker economies may need to enjoy some protection during a transition period. Such protective measures should, however, be kept to a minimum to ensure that the advantages of free competition are not put in peril.

Those who perceive the EU as a demon, on the other hand, perceive the world system as basically unjust and asymmetrical. The negotiations take place between a neo-colonial great power, whose power partly stems from its former exploitation of its counterparts, and weak, highly dependent developing states. They interpret the effects of liberalization in a totally different way. The consequence of allowing EU firms to compete on the domestic markets of the ACP countries, according to them, is that local firms will be driven out of business and that local farmers will be unable to compete with subsidized European products. In the background is a profound scepticism towards the benefits of free trade for developing countries.

Basic cleavages also exist in the two sides' views of, and priorities as regards, development. The adherents of an angel image contend that development, mainly interpreted as growth, is a natural effect of free trade and of imposing rules and standards on, for example, investments, government procurement and competition, which will attract foreign and local investments. For those that are sceptic to the EU's approach, poverty eradication and social development are the main concerns, and EU efforts should be clearly directed towards these goals. Developing countries cannot fully reap the potential benefits of free trade because they lack the necessary administrative and material capacity and infrastructure. This must be at hand before liberalization of weak economies is possible.

At the bottom of the two contrasting images are thus fundamental differences in world-views and causal beliefs. These differences may be called ideological, in the sense that they refer to 'sets of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organized social action, and specifically political action' (Seliger 1976: 14, quoted in Lundquist 1982: 41).

Still, the black-and-white nature of the two contending images needs to be explained. Why are there no nuances, no admissions that the EU in reality perhaps behaves in a way that lies somewhere between the two extremes; that is, that it is neither an angel nor a demon, but instead 'just human'? One possible interpretation is that this is a deliberate strategy on the part of the two sides in order to enhance the persuasive impact of the message they want to convey. This would imply that the actors involved believe that persuasion is more effective if the message presented is internally consistent, and that the 'targets' are ready to believe in black-and-white depictions of policy. This strategic actor-interpretation is obviously hard to disprove. The impression formed by interviewing many of the actors involved is, however, that the angel and demon images are not strategically conceived but rather reflect cognitive convictions and strongly held beliefs.

Closely related to belief systems is a tendency for political actors to seek cognitive balance and consistency in their policies (Jervis 1976, ch.4; Vertzberger 1990: 137-143). Individuals have a strong need 'to maintain a consistent cognitive system that produces stable and simplified cognitive structures' (Vertzberger 1990: 137). One effect is an inclination to argue that the policy they advocate is the best on all dimensions under consideration, what is in the literature called 'belief system overkill' (Rathburn 2007: 547; Jervis 1976: 129). Actors thus insist that the policy they favour is supported by many logically independent reasons. Commission officials argue that EPAs will deliver not only a freer trading system and growth but also development. NGOs contend that they lead to unemployment, food insecurity, increased inequality as well as regional disintegration.

Homogenous identity constructions furthermore tend to blind actors from their own failings and deficiencies (Diez and Pace 2007). This may enable practices that undermine the construction itself, for example by resulting in behaviour that outsiders perceive as inconsistent. Perceived incoherence may, as I will show below, diminish an actor's level of effectiveness.

The need for consistency, which satisfies a need among decision makers to feel that their actions are just but also helps them avoid the burden of weighing competing values against each other (Jervis 1976, ch.4; Tetlock 1991), tends to produce stable cognitive systems (belief perseverance) (Levy 1994; cf. Vertzberger 1990: 113). New information is assimilated into previously existing beliefs. Several mechanisms are at play here. People see what they expect to see: expectations 'create predispositions that lead actors to notice certain things and to neglect others, to immediately and often unconsciously draw certain inferences from what is noticed, and to find it difficult to consider alternatives' (Jervis 1976: 145). Attribution theory tells us that actors tend to attribute negative actions from perceived 'opponents' to the characteristics and

disposition of the other, while they explain behaviour that could be regarded as positive to the impact of situational factors (Jönsson 1990). Vice versa, one's own positive actions are seen as the result of one's disposition, while acts with arguably negative effects are explained by reference to the situation ('I was forced to do this by circumstances'). So when NGOs explain concessions from the Commission that could be perceived as development-friendly they do this by pointing to outside pressures, including their own campaigns. The Commission defends its massive pressure upon ACP governments to have an agreement before the end of 2007, as well as its insistence that EPAs are the only realistic solution, by referring to legal constraints and necessities.

Finally, perceptions of centralization – to see the behaviour of the other as 'more centralized, planned and coordinated than it is' (Jervis 1976: 319) – are another common cognitive phenomenon. NGOs never refer to disunity within the Commission, while in reality there have been clear discrepancies with regard to the trade versus aid-dimension between DG Trade and DG Development, but also within DG Trade itself (Elgström and Frennhof Larsén 2008). The tendency within the Commission to present a common front to outsiders obviously serves to support such an image. Likewise, there seems to exist a tendency in the Commission to regard all development NGOs as 'enemies' that, because of 'an ideological straitjacket', seek to obstruct and potentially prevent highly beneficial agreements between the EU and the ACP regions.

4. Consequences of black-and-white images [↑]

For the Commission, adopting a stereotypic, one-dimensional angel image creates two potential dangers. First, it risks becoming rhetorically entrapped (Schimmelfennig 2003) by its own arguments. 'What appears to be a cost-free rhetorical commitment or a shrewd argumentative move [...] can turn into a costly constraint [...]. Once rhetorical actors have publicly committed themselves to a claim [...] it is difficult for them to renege on this commitment' (Schimmelfennig 2003: 222). Picturing the EU policy in rosy colours, not only being instrumental to liberalization and growth but also to social and human development and taking into consideration not only EU interests but also the interests of impoverished people in the ACP countries, opens the EU both to demands for negotiation concessions and to post-negotiation accusations of not living up to its promises. Proclaiming EPAs a tool for development made it more difficult to withstand ACP demands for an unambiguous development profile in the agreement. During the final year of negotiations, the Commission also went back from its earlier insistence that development aspects were not to be included in the EPA agreements, as they were dealt with in other parts of the Cotonou agreement, and agreed to include a 'development chapter', a separate chapter on 'partnership for trade and sustainable development', in the text.

Second, promoting a consistent and homogenous angel image increases the risk that others, nota bene one's negotiating partners, will strike down on inconsistencies and perceived double standards. The EU will easily be seen as betraying its proclaimed ideals. According to Diez and Pace (2007), incongruence between an actor's openly announced self-image and others' perceptions of its behaviour leads to risks of ineffectiveness: if one negotiating party does not accept the proclaimed self-image of its opponent, or sees it as inconsistent with the actual behaviour of that actor, it will doubt the sincerity and credibility of the actor and hesitate to agree to its proposals. The normative and persuasive power of the EU diminishes if the developing countries don't believe in the good intentions proclaimed by the EU and instead focus on incoherence between verbal rhetoric and perceived behaviour. Promises of future additional assistance are less credible if the potential recipient perceives the EU as driven by self-interests and believes that the EU has previously not delivered on such promises.

Similarly, spreading the angel image may aggravate the problem that Christopher Hill (1993; 1998) has labelled the 'capability-expectations gap'. Outsiders', in this case the ACPs', expectations are raised by a language that pictures the Union as an altruistic and generous partner. When the EU, because of European, national and institutional interests does not fulfil these high expectations, the perceived gap between expectations and actual behaviour leads to resentment and frustration. 'Promising too much' may therefore unnecessarily increase the level of conflict between the EU and the ACP.

In the EPA case, there are several illustrations of perceived inconsistencies in EU behaviour and of a

sceptical attitude towards EU commitments. The promises of additional foreign assistance were welcomed, but the prevailing view seems to have been that this was not really additional money, but money that was to have arrived anyway. To quote an African NGO-representative (Terraviva 2007b), the EU 'has lured countries into EPAs by promising them that there would be development programmes. That is a lie from the beginning [...] there will be no development programmes. There is only the EDF (the European Development Fund) – and there is no new money there'. And ACP politicians don't seem to have been convinced by the EU promises of exceptions for sensitive products and long transition periods but instead predicted dire consequences for their own economies. According to Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade, 'si l'on instaure une zone de libre-échange, la plupart de nos industries, qui ne peuvent pas tenir la concurrence face aux industries européennes, vont disparaître' (1) (France 24 2007; cf. IPP Media 2007, quoting Tanzania's trade minister). NGOs and ACP spokespersons also questioned the EU insistence that no credible alternatives to EPAs existed. 'This is untrue. They have choices, but lack political will' (Christian Aid and Traidcraft 2007). ACP countries raised a number of alternatives: the possibility of extending the WTO waiver or to let non-LDC (Least Developed Country) ACP states be subject to the more generous enhanced GSP (General System of Preferences).

NGOs are also subject to potential risks when they present a black-and-white demon image of the EU. An obvious danger is that their possibility to influence the EU's development policies may decrease. If NGOs – because of their persistent and vehement critique of the EU's policies – are perceived as enemies by Commission representatives, their chance to moderate EU policy is apt to diminish. Their constructive proposals will drown in perceived over-all negativism. It should also be borne in mind that the Commission in the area of international trade policy is in possession of considerable expertise. It is therefore not dependent upon NGO technical knowledge. In other issue-areas, limited Commission competence has led to a reliance on interest group information, and thus to restrictions in the Commission's freedom of action (Mazey and Richardson 1993: 21).

In interviews, Commission officials complained that whatever they did, and whatever concessions they made, this was always constructed as faulty and ill-intentioned by NGOs (interviews 1, 2). NGOs are still invited to discussions with the Commission but the propensity to really listen to them and to engage in a dialogue with them is small when they are perceived as 'always complaining' and never ready to see anything positive in the Commission's proposals.

This might of course be a risk that NGOs are willing to take if they believe that they exert more influence by engaging in public campaigns or by focusing its lobbying on the European Parliament (Harvey 1993: 197; Mazey and Richardson 1993: 12-13) than by engaging in policy dialogue with the Commission. Still, a more nuanced position could arguably allow them to use both these potential avenues of influence.

5. Conclusions [↑]

In this short research note I have demonstrated the existence of two starkly contrasting images of the EU's goals and behaviour in the recently concluded EPA negotiations with countries in Africa, The Caribbean and the Pacific. The Union is in the debate portrayed either as all good, as an angel, or as all bad, as a demon. The debate has thus not allowed for any interpretation of the EU in shades of grey, as 'just human', where negotiators carry out a balancing act, in which they have the best interests of the ACP in mind while at the same time being obliged to protect vital European interests.

I have interpreted the prevalence of black-and-white images by referring to the ideological nature of the debate, based on diametrically opposed world-views and causal beliefs. The homogeneity of the images was further explained by introducing some cognitive phenomena: consistency seeking, belief system overkill and perseverance and patterns of attribution. I have furthermore proposed that the tendency to describe one's own and the other's intentions and actions in extreme terms may have deleterious consequences for the actors. For the Commission, this may lead to unnecessary bargaining concessions, due to rhetorical entrapment, and to negotiation ineffectiveness because of the inconsistencies that easily occur when you claim to be an angel. For NGOs, depicting the EU as a demon seems to decrease its potential to exert direct influence on the Commission. The probability of a more nuanced approach seems, however, small given

the existing worldview and images of the Commission within the development NGOs referred to in this article.

The black-and-white nature of the debate on EPAs between the Commission and NGOs spells bad news for those who would like to see more elements of deliberative democracy in European public debates. To rely on black-and-white images of partners in a debate probably implies that you are not open to the arguments of the other side. Belief perseverance and the psychological need for consistency contribute to cognitive closure (Jervis 1976). As a willingness to listen to others and genuinely consider their arguments is a cornerstone of deliberative democracy (Chambers 2003), more nuanced portrayals of self and others would therefore not only serve to improve policy but also make processes more deliberative, and in this sense more democratic.

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5 DG Development official, Brussels, 15 June 2007

6 Representative of Eurostep (NGO network focusing on European development co-operation), Brussels, 26 June 2006

7 Representative of Cidse (Association of Catholic development organizations), Brussels, 26 June, 2006

8 Representative of Aprodev (Association of Protestant development organizations), Brussels, 27 June 2006

9 Representative of 11.11.11 (Flemish North-South movement), Brussels, 27 June 2006

Endnotes

(1) "If a free-trade zone is established, the majority of our industries, which cannot compete with European industrie, will disappear" (author's translation).