INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE
ACP EMINENT PERSONS GROUP

STATEMENT BY
HIS EXCELLENCY
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CHAIRMAN OF THE ACP EMINENT
PERSONS GROUP (EPG)

ACP House, Brussels, Belgium
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The President of Council, Hon. Phandu Skelemani, Honourable Minister for International Cooperation and Development of the Republic of Botswana,

Secretary-General of the ACP, Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas,

Honourable Ministers,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to express how honoured I am to have been invited to serve as a member of the ACP Eminent Persons Group.

In the Holy Bible it was said that the Almighty God gave King Solomon the privilege of asking anything he wanted from the Great Creator. Solomon did not ask for wealth; nor did he ask for power or for long life. He simply asked the Almighty to grant him wisdom.
God was said to have been very impressed with Solomon's innate wisdom in asking for wisdom rather than any perishable worldly goods. And because he asked for wisdom, God gave him not only wisdom, but added a lot of other things to him: wealth, power, knowledge, insight, good looks and, as we are told, not less than 700 women, not least among them the beautiful royal princess of Abyssinia, Makeda, the Queen of Sheba! May God grant us wisdom to undertake this noble task being assigned to us today.

Your Excellencies,

We meet today at a time of challenge as well as opportunity. The ACP comprises 80 countries, with a total population estimated at 973 million people, spanning Africa, the Caribbean and the far-flung islands of the Pacific. Our newest members are countries such as Timor Leste and the new Republic of South Sudan, which is in the process of formalising its membership.
I understand that, shortly before the upheavals that consumed him, former Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi had approached the Secretary-General on the possibility of his country joining the ACP. It is encouraging to note that no country has ever renounced its membership of the organisation.

As we all know, the ACP are a diverse group: Some are large emerging free market economies such as South Africa, while others, such as Cuba, are avowedly socialist. Several are oil-exporters such as Nigeria, Angola and Equatorial Guinea. Some – particularly the islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific – are vulnerable small island states, while others are landlocked countries. While the majority are low-income countries, some are middle-income and a couple are wealthy financial centres. We are also diverse by virtue of our linguistic groupings; from the English-speaking Commonwealth to the Francophone, Lusophone and the Spanish-speaking groups.
As diverse as we are, we are united by virtue of our collective marginality in global economic and political relations -- held together not only by the bonds of history, but by the imperatives of global geopolitics. More than ever before, we are united by our sense of shared destiny, our solidarity and commitment to the pursuit of equity in international economic relations.

I have been privileged to have been in public life for four decades. In-between serving in government I created the African Leadership Forum, an international NGO and policy think tank that has been involved in developing leaders and strengthening the quality of policy dialogue on international development. And only last month I inaugurated the Obasanjo Foundation with a mission to feed Africa, promote youth leadership, support education for women, and combat sickle cell disease by bringing together government, non governmental organisations and private sector to comfront these issues.
I have met succeeding generations of European leaders from Wily Brandt to Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher and Francois Mitterrand, to name but a few. If my memory serves me right, I recall that when the Founding Fathers of the New Europe were establishing the building blocks of what was to become the EU – leaders such as Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, Paul-Henri Spaak, Walter Hallstein and Jean Monnet – had a clear vision of Europe’s vocation in the world: a harbinger of hope, a leaven among the nations – a moderating voice in international relations.

The evolving partnership between the EU and the ACP was part of this European sense of global responsibility and commitment to international ethics and social justice. While we believe it is in Europe’s self-interest to keep up with these international obligations, we owe it to ourselves to become responsible and effective players on the global arena.
We believe that this Europe, which has had links with Africa going back to classical antiquity, will remain an inextricable part of our universe of moral, economic and political reference. We all know that those relations have not always been based on truth and justice. But we now have an opportunity to build a stronger basis for cooperation that will ensure mutual progress and development among the nations of Europe and those of Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean. At the same time, we cannot – and must not – abdicate taking full responsibility for our own future; building on own resources and collective strength; and leveraging on our moral capital as the largest coalition of the world’s poor.

The EPG has a big and onerous responsibility ahead. The peoples and nations of the ACP expect us to marshal our collective wisdom to chart a new course that will improve the welfare and standing of our people in the twenty-first century. We cannot disappoint them.

I thank you for your kind attention.