

The 20th Overseas Countries and Territories – European Union Forum
The 20th OCTs-EU Forum

26–29/02/2024, Brussels/Belgium

Final Report

SUMMARY

General: The 20th annual OCTs-EU Forum – the highest-level platform for dialogue within our partnership - took place on 26-29 February 2024 in Brussels, with its main event - the Plenary Session chaired by Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen - held on 29 February in Berlaymont. The Plenary Session was preceded by trilateral meetings between individual OCTs, EU Member States (MS) - to which they are linked - and the Commission, a thematic workshop on ‘Regional Partnerships and Integration’ focusing on the Global Gateway (GG), and the OCTs’ Association (OCTA) Ministerial Conference chaired by Greenland.

The Forum was attended by ca. 150 persons. All 13 OCTs participated at the Head of Territory or Ministerial level. The Forum also saw high-level participation of the MS with special links to the OCTs (DK, FR, NL) and 5 other MS (BE, CZ, MT, PT, SK), representatives of the European Parliament (Vice-Chair of DEVE), EIB, Outermost Regions, OACPS, 3 SIDS as well as development banks and institutions. Several line DGs (including CNECT, GROW, TRADE, REGIO) and the EEAS (Special Envoy for SIDS) were also present. The OCTs’ Youth Network – initiated by INTPA - provided a valuable contribution with a photo exhibition and a video on OCTs’ cultural heritage. 7 youth representatives attended the Forum, including 1 from Greenland appointed by the Commissioner as her Special Advisor. The next Forum will be held in 2025 in Aruba.

MAIN TAKE AWAYS:

1.Geopolitics: The Forum injected a new momentum into the OCTs-EU partnership and confirmed that the OCTs are part of the EU’s geostrategic agenda: through their special links to 3 MS, the OCTs are viewed as ‘outposts’ of Europe and represent strategic assets for the EU’s external action to promote our values and advance our interests throughout the four corners of the globe: in the North Atlantic and the Arctic, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean. In view of rising geopolitical competition, there is a need for the EU to capitalise more on the political dimension of our long-standing partnership.

2.Global Gateway: To explore our partnership more strategically, the Forum expressed necessity to build more resilient connections between the EU and the OCTs by boosting infrastructure investments coupled with soft measures, e.g., to improve regulatory environment, under the umbrella of the GG - viewed as a path towards sustainable development. One of the priorities here is to bring OCTs closer to EU’s regional cooperation initiatives by promoting win-win partnerships between them and their neighbouring countries and territories, including ACP and non-ACP states, and Outermost Regions.

3.OCTA: The Forum demonstrated that the OCTs-EU partnership needs strong and effective OCTA to support our mutual interests and to work collectively through our political and policy dialogue. However, OCTA has been dysfunctional for the last few years. A Political Declaration and a ‘Strategic Update’ presented at the Forum confirmed existing administrative weaknesses of the association and called for the necessary reforms.

4.Communication and Visibility: The Forum highlighted the need to further increase the visibility of the OCTs-EU partnership (among the public, within OCTs’ administration and EU institutions). Raising awareness of the strategic role and added value of our joint actions will make the partnership more accountable, support broader engagement of relevant stakeholders and strengthen the existing cooperation ties.

5.Youth and Culture: The Forum reaffirmed continued commitment to meaningful youth engagement in our partnership. The Youth Declaration focused on OCTs’ cultural heritage - to be preserved and promoted. The oceans were identified as a common feature deeply anchored in OCTs’ cultural identities. Working more with the youth on sustainable solutions in this field will help advance our cooperation agenda.

WAY FORWARD: The Forum made clear once more that the OCTs are part of the EU family, with shared values, and should be part of the EU’s global ambition to consolidate existing alliances and forge new ones. In the follow-up of the Forum, priority actions should include:

1.Geopolitics: To take more strategic advantage of our partnership, OCTs’ involvement (with due regard to their status) in relevant EU regional strategies will be further promoted, including for the Arctic, Indo-Pacific and LAC, as well as the Samoa Agreement and the Global Gateway. OCTs’ interests will also continue to be supported in international/UN forums, such as SIDS and COP conferences, and relevant EU trade negotiations (Art. 43 of DOAG).

2.Global Gateway: All 16 Multiannual Indicative Programmes - MIPs (bilateral and regional/intraregional) under DOAG, provide a strong foundation for pursuing the GG objectives. However, to maximise transformative impact and avoid fragmentation, there is a need to attract much larger and focused investments, public and private, often in a wider regional context. For this purpose and where relevant: OCTs’ programmes will be more strongly integrated into EU’s regional cooperation initiatives (e.g., GG Flagships/TEIs).

3.OCTA: The association is facing administrative challenges and is undergoing institutional reforms. In this context, there is a need to reframe our current cooperation and explore ways of future engagement to accompany OCTA in its reform efforts, including via a dedicated technical assistance managed by the Commission.

4.Communication and Visibility: A recently launched communication campaign will further enhance awareness and create positive perception about the OCTs-EU partnership among the public. This will be completed by training activities with the OCTs about the EU, including on their access to EU programmes (beyond the DOAG), e.g., Horizon Europe, InvestEU, and CEF.

5.Youth and Culture: The OCTs’ Youth Network will continue its mission as an important platform for dialogue further enriching the OCTs-EU partnership, e.g., within a planned DOAG programme on OCTs’ cultural heritage. Cross-OCT exchanges and education activities – with strong youth participation - will play a pivotal role in amplifying cultural awareness and boosting sustainable community development in the islands.

DETAILED REPORT:

1. Welcome and Keynote Speeches

Following the welcome and opening of the Forum by Commissioner Urpilainen, the Minister of Statehood and Foreign Affairs of **Greenland** took the floor, thanking the EU for the invitation and organisation of the Forum and taking stock of Greenland's mandate as outgoing OCTA Chair. She underlined historic ties between the OCTs and the respective Member States, as well as the opportunities and perspectives of the OCTs-EU partnership in the current geopolitical context.

2. Political Statements

The ensuing session consisted of political statements by representatives of the OCTs, and the EU Member States linked with the OCTs: France, the Netherlands and Denmark. These were followed by interventions by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU, as well as the European Parliament, and the Presidency of the Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions (Réunion) – both of which are associated partners of the Forum.

EU Member States (France, the Netherlands, Denmark) and Representatives of the OCTs

France underlined the importance of promoting the economic, ecological, and soft power potential of the OCTs. The OCTs are an asset for the EU and their regional environment, and the EU must continue to actively invest in the development of these territories, considering their specificities. In this context, France highlighted the need for the EU to play a continuously active role in the process of regional integration of the OCTs, while focusing on a limited number of strategic initiatives. Increased collective efforts are deemed necessary to closely associate the OCTs under the umbrella of the EU Global Gateway to promote strategic public and private investments as well as to further strengthen institutional and trade cooperation. France welcomed the successful implementation of the Decision on the Overseas Association, including Greenland (DAOG) and supported a renewed strategic ambition for the OCTs-EU association.

The **Netherlands** reiterated the importance of seizing the opportunities offered by the OCTs-EU partnership to tackle common challenges. The OCTs represent strategic assets for the international action of the EU and the promotion of its values. The need for more action at regional level was underscored with a proactive involvement of the OCTs in relevant EU initiatives with other partner countries and territories. Simplified procedures and access to EU horizontal programmes, as well as more targeted information sharing - with both EU Member States and the OCTs - about EU activities in the respective regions were highlighted as important activities to be further promoted.

Denmark commended the establishment of a Commission Office in Nuuk as a sign of the European commitment to strengthen its ties with Greenland, which will also help consolidate collaboration both regionally in the Arctic and globally. The Office will further enhance relations with local actors, facilitate policy dialogue and programme implementation, as well as promote EU private and public investments under the Global Gateway. Welcoming the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a strategic partnership to develop sustainable raw materials value chains, Denmark looks forward to exploring this new area of 'green growth' cooperation between Greenland and the EU.

Speaking for **French Polynesia**, the Minister of Agriculture and Marine Resources emphasised the importance of aligning the EU assistance with regional strategies/priorities, such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, while recognising the growing geostrategic challenges in the region. He advocated for closer regional cooperation and stressed the need for close collaboration with the EU to address common challenges, such as climate change and energy transition, food security, biodiversity protection, and digital connectivity. Simplification of procedures and greater flexibility in accessing EU programmes was requested, along with adequate financial support to meet the specific needs of the OCTs.

The Representative of **Curaçao** (Minister of Traffic, Transport and Urban Planning) noticed that the relationship with the EU had undergone significant changes, evolving from a donor-recipient relation to a reciprocal approach between equals, based on consultations, ownership, and collaboration. The OCTs-EU relationship should increasingly promote regional and intra-regional integration and cooperation to strengthen the links between neighbours and to unlock economic opportunities. Strategic dialogue on digital connectivity (including a possible extension of the BELLA II cable to the wider Caribbean to connect the region directly with the EU) was highlighted as an important area of our further engagement. The Minister also announced that Curaçao would join CARICOM later this year.

The Minister of Statehood and Foreign Affairs of **Greenland** confirmed strong convergence of our strategic interests and demonstrated positive advancements in our cooperation agenda. She underscored that critical raw materials (CRM) and renewable energy/hydrogen are new sectors of the EU-Greenland cooperation framework where we proactively engage to start first activities under the new Green Growth Programme (financed by DOAG) already this year. The Programme will be the prime vehicle for implementing the MoU for a strategic partnership to develop sustainable raw materials value chains signed with Greenland in November last year. Equally, the Minister underlined the importance of the EU's continuous support to education, with an increased focus now on vocational training and technical skills crucial for renewable energy and CRM sectors as reflected in the new Education Programme (financed by DOAG). The Minister also referred to the recently adopted by Greenland Foreign, Security and Defence Strategy for 2024-2033 (an Arctic strategy entitled '*Greenland in the World: nothing about us, without us*') that expresses full support for the Arctic to remain a 'low-tension area' with the focus on sustainable development – aiming at prosperous and peaceful Greenland in a prosperous and peaceful Arctic.

Presidency of the Council of the EU (Belgium) and Associated Partners of the OCTs-EU Partnership

In his statement, the Director General for Bilateral Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of **Belgium, Presidency of the Council** of the EU, stressed the increasingly strategic role of the OCTs for the EU, particularly in the light of growing strain from geopolitical developments. He further recognised common achievements of the cooperation, such as actions implemented under the Decision on the Overseas Association, including Greenland (DOAG) on digital, climate change, renewable energy, transport, and education - in line with the EU green transition and the objectives of the Global Gateway strategy. He stressed that the EU is a long-standing partner for OCTs in support of their development ambitions, reform agendas and value-based policies. Through our relations, we are promoting together trade opportunities, regional integration as well as people-to-people exchanges.

The Vice-Chair of the Committee on Development of the **European Parliament** highlighted the importance of the OCTs for the EU in terms of their broad outreach capacity, which is vital to cope with major upheavals, such as the climate emergency and geostrategic challenges. He welcomed the renewed commitment to the OCTs-EU partnership and tangible investments in sustainable development. However, to ensure a more collective approach to global threats, it is essential to ensure increasingly strategic cooperation with the OCTs - rooted in respect, dialogue, and trust and happening in a wider regional context, for example, in the framework of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. He pleaded for strong cooperation initiatives for Ocean Governance, an integrated and sustainably managed blue economy, and called for a global network of Maritime Protected Areas (the “Blue Belt”), linked with the Outermost Regions and the OCTs.

The President of the Réunion Regional Council, **President of the Conference of Presidents of the Outermost Regions (OR)** underlined in her video statement that despite statutory differences, the ORs and the OCTs share several characteristics. The importance of cooperation with and between the OCTs and the ORs was underscored to value the extraordinary asset that constitutes their presence all around the globe. The President recalled that both the OCTs and the ORs as small economies were particularly vulnerable to climate challenges and digital isolation and deemed it necessary to have closer exchanges in these fields.

3. Regional Partnerships and Integration (Political Statements)

The plenary reconvened for thematic exchanges on the topic of Regional Partnerships and Integration, during which political statements were delivered by the OCTs (Bonaire, New Caledonia, the French Southern and Atlantic Lands: TAAF, Saint Barthelemy, and Sint Maarten).

The interventions focused on the value added of regional cooperation within the framework of the Global Gateway strategy, not only in terms of economic opportunities but also considering the exchange of know-how and better coordination on regional and global challenges.

The digital gap is particularly affecting isolated regions, including the OCTs and the need for a closer collaboration between the OCTs and their neighbours to find common solutions was stressed. As an example, on how to progress operationally on this challenge, the connection of the wider Caribbean, including the OCTs, to the BELLA II cable (a direct digital link between Latin America and Europe) was repeatedly mentioned. The same goes for environmental threats, where problems generally call for close collaboration with regional partners. Taking the example of the sargassum algae in the Caribbean, economic opportunities should be explored, too. Turning to the Pacific, OCTs’ representatives highlighted the importance of regional integration through the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and increased cooperation with countries like Australia and New Zealand.

The representatives welcomed EU’s financial support for regional cooperation but also called for more flexible and less bureaucratic modalities to facilitate project implementation. It was underscored that these issues cannot be dealt with in isolation and on an individual OCT territory level only but constitute shared concerns among neighbours and demand regional solutions.

4. Trilateral Meetings

The three trilateral meetings at political level brought together the authorities of OCTs, the representatives of the three Member States to which they are linked (DK, FR, NL), and the European Commission.

Denmark and Greenland warmly welcomed the upcoming visit by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and flagged strong appreciation for the establishment of the European Commission Office in Nuuk. Greenland also welcomed the expansion of cooperation with the EU into the areas of green transition, including critical raw materials and renewable energy/hydrogen. It was highlighted that the geographic location presents specific challenges to Greenland, that call for a diversification of economic links and enhanced collaboration with neighbouring countries such as Iceland, Canada, and the USA. DK representatives echoed Greenland's sentiments, offering full support for Greenland's ambitions and a readiness to assist in fostering EU-Greenland cooperation.

During the political trilateral meeting with **France and French OCTs**, FR emphasised the priority of green and blue transitions for economic development, advocating for the OCTs to be central to EU strategies and their involvement in regional projects and strategies. The issue of sargassum in the Caribbean and the need for improved digital connectivity were also mentioned. Other challenges are stronger OCTs' participation in horizontal EU programmes, like Horizon Europe, and stepping-up communication on the OCTs-EU partnership. From their side, the OCTs highlighted the significant impact of climate change on their territories and discussed both the necessity and the complexity of regional integration, due to language barriers and regulatory discrepancies with neighbouring countries and territories. The signature of the Samoa Agreement was welcomed, whilst a role of the OCTs as observers in the joint regional institutions was called for.

During the trilateral meeting with **the Netherlands and Dutch OCTs**, NL expressed satisfaction with the ongoing cooperation and confirmed willingness to support further advancements in the OCTs-EU partnership. The OCTs raised the issue of climate change and its impact on the islands (for example, sargassum) and highlighted their commitment to climate targets. Despite not having signed the Paris Agreement yet, some Dutch OCTs are ready now to be part of it. Other priorities are economic development, investments in education, childcare, youth centres, as well as water management and food security. The OCTs also expressed the need to engage with the EU on digital connectivity, including the BELLA II cable ensuring an upgraded quality link with the EU. Aruba announced the inauguration of a new faculty at their university on May 20 (built with the EU support) and invited the Commissioner to attend. Commissioner will explore combining this visit with her participation in the EU-SIDS4 conference.

The trilateral meetings concluded with a shared commitment to deepen cooperation and address the diverse challenges and opportunities faced by the OCTs as well as to ensure their meaningful integration into relevant EU cooperation frameworks with partner countries and territories, including the ACP states and the Outermost Regions, under the umbrella of the Global Gateway strategy. The EU stands ready to support the OCTs endeavours, and future discussions and actions will aim to translate these shared goals into tangible outcomes.

Commitment to the OCTs' Association (OCTA) was reaffirmed, with a call for a redefinition of its mission and operating modalities (including its governance structure) to better promote and defend the common interests of all OCTs.

5. Youth Engagement and Culture (Political Statements)

This session was introduced by a former member of the OCTs' Youth Network from Greenland, appointed by Commissioner Urpilainen as her Special Advisor on Youth from April 2024 onward. She developed on her personal experience as a former member of the 2022-2023 edition of the OCT's Youth Network and her current engagements as a youth activist.

Following her speech, the floor was given to two ongoing OCTs' Youth Network members, who announced three contributions prepared by the Network for this Forum: (i) a Photo Exhibition 'Cultural Mosaic': OCT Youth Network's Perspectives on Cultural Diversity in the OCTs, (ii) a video showcasing the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the OCTs and (iii) a Youth Declaration. Following the broadcast of the video, reflecting all the 13 OCTs and their cultural diversity, the two members read the Youth Declaration on behalf of the Network. The Declaration focuses on the opportunity to be part of the OCTs' Youth Network and on the importance of cultural heritage and identity of the OCTs.

Representatives of the OCTs (Saba, Sint-Eustatius, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, Wallis and Futuna) were then invited to put forward their views and aspirations on issues regarding the theme of Youth Engagement and Culture. In their statements, the OCTs underscored the significance of their cultural heritage and identity as well as their commitment - through active community participation, education, and heritage preservation initiatives - to preserving this heritage. Speakers highlighted their efforts to prioritise youth and culture by means of digital training, cultural tourism, and potential intercultural exchanges. The OCTs consider vital to prioritise on youth and to recognise the immense potential of young people. The OCTs' Youth Network was generally seen as a huge success that merits to be continued for the empowerment of young people. Against this background, it was deemed necessary to propose more socio-economic opportunities to young people, by setting benchmarks for investments on health, culture, tourism, nature - also to attract potential investors. With the support by the EU and the respective Member States, improvements in basic and higher educations have been made but major budgetary constraints remain. The territories underscored the importance of building partnerships with and for the Youth, renewing existing programmes, and creating new opportunities for regional exchanges and mobility for young people. They also called for increased funding for programmes like Erasmus to promote regional mobility for young people and workers. The Pacific OCTs emphasised the importance of English language training for the Youth to strengthen their integration into the regional context.

6. Signature Ceremony, adoption of Joint Forum Conclusions and Closure of the Forum

During the signature ceremony, five new cooperation agreements worth 58 MEUR were endorsed under the Decision on the Overseas Association, including Greenland (DOAG). These included 2 Multiannual Indicative Programmes, one intraregional and one for Wallis and Futuna, 1 Annual Action Plan for Bonaire, and 2 Financing Agreements for Aruba and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories (TAAF).

At the end of the Forum, following a short speech by the Prime Minister of Aruba as incoming OCTA Chair, Commissioner Urpilainen delivered the closing remarks, declaring the Joint

Forum Conclusions adopted (see Annex II) and the closure of the 20th OCTs-EU Forum. The event was followed by gala reception hosted by the European Commission at Château Sainte-Anne in Brussels.

7. Thematic Workshop on Regional Partnerships and Integration (Tuesday 27 February)

On Tuesday 27 February, following the individual trilateral technical meetings held between the OCTs, the Member States to which they are linked, and the European Commission, a Thematic Workshop on Regional Partnerships and Integration was organised.

The workshop was aimed to explore and strengthen the role of the OCTs in win-win partnership initiatives with other countries and territories, including the EU Outermost Regions, to fight climate change, promote biodiversity, support energy transition, and enhance connectivity – in alignment with the priorities of the DOAG, and the Global Gateway strategy.

The workshop was opened by the Director of INTPA B, with a keynote speech on the importance of the Global Gateway Strategy as a transformative vehicle for addressing global challenges, and the opportunities it provides for OCTs. This was followed by the political statements of four OCTs representatives (Saint-Barthelemy, Curaçao, Wallis and Futuna, Greenland) on ‘Partnership Opportunities in a Regional Context’ (the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Arctic). Subsequently, two panel discussions on Digital Connectivity and Green and Blue Economy took place. A “Discussants’ Table” was established to ensure a lively, interdisciplinary conversation, that engaged with the panellists and audience on horizontal themes, including policy issues and financing.

The workshop served as an opportunity for participants to emphasise the significance of regional partnerships and integration, as essential aspects in addressing global challenges and advancing economies. It was reiterated that the Global Gateway Strategy remains a pivotal force behind the development of transformative initiatives, extending its influence on partnerships with the OCTs.

The limitations of traditional public support in tackling global challenges were acknowledged, underlining the necessity for a collaborative approach that encompasses a broad ecosystem of stakeholders under the umbrella of the Global Gateway/Team Europe – with a strong involvement of financial institutions and private sector. It was highlighted that by aligning efforts and enhancing investments, the collective capacity for supporting sustainable development could be substantially improved.

Moving forward, three main aspects were identified to continue to consolidate the OCTs-EU partnership. These include exploring and strengthening the integration of the OCTs within their regional basins; leveraging the Global Gateway strategy and its Investment Agenda as a conduit; and mobilising specific tools to encourage collaboration and regional integration (see Annex III).

8. Communication and Visibility

The Forum was an excellent opportunity to promote the OCTs-EU partnership by highlighting its geostrategic importance and the impact of our cooperation in selected priority areas, including climate change and renewable energy, digital connectivity, research, and education.

An overall [visual style](#) was used for all visibility materials, including a [teaser video](#). Live streaming of the keynote speeches and political statements during the Forum was provided and a [press release](#) was published on the event's website and on the INTPA social media accounts.

Annexes:

- Annex I - Agenda of the Forum
- Annex II - Joint Forum Conclusions
- Annex III - Thematic Workshop on Regional Partnerships and Integration
- Annex IV – Youth Declaration