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Relational Trust in International Cooperation: the Case of North-South Trade Negotiations

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The positive impact of trust on the willingness to cooperate has been widely recognised within social sciences. Trust, however, has not been adequately incorporated into the dominant paradigms on explaining international cooperation in International Relations. This paper argues that in situations of uncertainty, trusting or mistrusting a cooperation partner influences the negotiating behaviour of states actors. Trusting behaviour is understood to be based on a non-rational mode of reasoning, which shapes negotiating behaviour beyond the cognitive calculation of risks in a given situation. Whether or not the other actor is considered as trustworthy depends to a large extent on the conception of the identity relationship between the cooperation partners. This is suggestive of a constructivist understanding of trust as a relational, identity-based concept that is difficult to capture using a measurable, calculative notion of trust employed in a game-theoretical, strictly rationalist framework. The article presents two conceptual lenses: benevolence-based trust and identification-based trust. The empirical analysis covers evidence from two of the six regions that were negotiating the Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union: West Africa and the Caribbean region.

Key words: relational trust; constructivism; identities; rationalism; international cooperation; trade negotiations

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Introduction

'Trust is a necessary condition for cooperation', states Hoffman in his article 'A Conceptualisation of Trust in International Relations' (Hoffman, 2002). However, the phenomenon of trust has received surprisingly little attention in the literature on International Relations. When touched upon, it has often been in terms of broad generalisations (Larson, 1997, p. 703). Realists regard the realm of international politics as determined by material factors, with the international distribution of capabilities as the all-important explanatory variable. In a Hobbesian tradition, the realist school conceptualises international politics as the 'realm of the lack of trust' in which states face a never-ending 'security dilemma' (Rengger, 1991, pp. 469-470). Therefore, realist theories tend to rely on the assumption that states are inherently mistrustful of each other, and have little to say about variations in the level of trust. In contrast to realist thinking, scholars closer to the liberal tradition in International Relations stress the possibilities for cooperation as a means to overcome the security dilemma, thereby opposing the assumption that mistrust resides at the heart of international politics. Karl Deutsch

regards trust as the basis upon which peaceful relations are built (Deutsch, 1968). However, the mechanisms that transform trust into cement of peaceful relations are left unclear.

The dominant literature on trust in International Relations is deeply rooted in the rational choice paradigm, being mostly concerned with the way in which trust influences perceptions of risk of individual decision-makers engaging or refraining from international cooperation. International Relations approaches to measuring trust have advanced furthest in the field of international regimes and organisations. One of its main concerns – international cooperation – does not always depend on trust but can also be influenced by other factors, such as coercion (Hoffman, 2002), persuasion or inducement (Hasenclever, Mayer et al, 1997, p. 176). However, the latter factors can be classified as ‘external influence techniques’, while trust affects the choice to cooperate as an ‘initial trust orientation’ (Michener and Zeller, 1972, p. 139). In this way, trust is a crucial driving factor behind international cooperation. Within the field of International Relations, game theory-inspired accounts of international cooperation have most substantively engaged with the analysis of trust. Trust is predominately defined along the lines of a rational decision to take a risky action in spite of the possibility of being betrayed (Luhmann, 1988, pp. 94-107). Thus, trusting cooperative relationships are expected to emerge if the actors are willing to take risks given uncertainties about the other’s behaviour. The determinants of trust are, however, located at the level of the externally given and primarily materially defined situation structure: if the constellation of the actors’ interests makes defection from cooperation unlikely, trusting relationships become more likely to form (Rathbun, 2012, 5). The level of trust between states can therefore be inferred from the analysis of the structure of the situation (Kydd, 2005, 24), and reflects the actors’ rational assessments of risks in a given situation.

Few International Relations scholars have attempted to conceptualise trust as an inter-subjectively determined structural variable. This implies that it does not only influence individual risk calculations about particular decisions, but shapes the nature of inter-subjective relations in world politics, thereby deeply impinging upon the way in which actors reason about a decision in the first place (for notable exceptions see Aykens, 2005; Nicolaïdis, 2007; Crawford, 2002). Instead of rational calculations, trust as an inter-subjective variable implies a non-rational, relational mode of reasoning that guides decision-making. The level of trust cannot be inferred from situational circumstances, but depends inherently on the actors’ conception of the particular identity relationship between them. Interestingly, the concept of trust has rarely been seized upon by constructivist scholars, despite their focus on the concept of identity (Wendt, 1999) and their central claim that interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, not simply material ones (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001). Trust does not seem to classify as an ideational factor alongside inter-subjectively shared beliefs and international norms, with centrepieces of the ‘logic of appropriate behaviour’ presumably underpinning global politics. Likewise, English School scholars stressing the social nature of the international system have not substantially incorporated the role of inter-subjectively constituted trust into their analysis of global politics.

This paper aims to introduce a relational concept of trust to International Relations to broaden our understanding of the modes of reasoning that decision-makers make use of in international negotiations. It builds on Williamson’s critique of rationalist conceptions of trust as a risk calculation (Williamson, 1993, p. 463; see also Möllering, 2014) and instead relies on a relational conception of trust. Other disciplines in the social sciences, most notably sociology, long ago widened the conceptualisation of trust beyond the narrow limits of the individual actor-centred rational choice model towards such a socially based understanding. This paper therefore questions the rationalist assumption that the level of trust in international politics follows primarily from the given strategic structure of interaction. Instead, it situates state interaction within the specific context of historically

and socially constituted relations between actors, which affects the extent to which they trust or mistrust their partners. This leads to a new perspective on the determinants of trust, and the effects it may have: it not only affects the actors' risk calculations in situations of uncertainty, but shapes how actors assess their interactions in the first place, thereby constituting the relationship they have.

This paper's theoretical discussion of the concept of trust and its relevance for International Relations is then applied to the empirical case of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations between the European Union (EU) and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries in the time period of 2002-2007. The end of 2007 was the originally envisaged negotiating deadline for concluding the free trade agreement. But even today (as of August 2014), the negotiations have not been fully concluded. The EPA's story is an interesting case for considering the role of trust because of the huge power asymmetries between the partners. Trusting or mistrusting the EU is therefore likely to have affected negotiating behaviour, given the dependent position of the ACP countries, as well as the unexpected difficulties that the EU faced to conclude these agreements despite its superior bargaining power. The EPA negotiations were conducted between the EU and six, later seven, regions among the ACP countries. Two cases were selected for this paper: the negotiations of the EU with one of the Island regions, the Caribbean countries, and with one of the African regions, West Africa, because they are likely to vary across the dimension of the actors' identities.¹ This is important because, according to a relational understanding, trust depends on the actor's conceptions of the relationship with its counterpart. At the same time, both regions were chosen among the other possible ACP regions because they showed the greatest cohesion internally, while also showing different negotiating behaviour. The Caribbean region (represented by the Caribbean Forum, CARIFORUM) was the only one to conclude a comprehensive and regional EPA by 2007. The West African region (represented by the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS) almost in its entirety rejected the signing of the EPA agreement before the end of the 2007 deadline.

The empirical analysis relies on a combination of qualitative sources: First, this paper is based on four written questionnaires and 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with West African and Caribbean trade representatives involved in the negotiation process of the Economic Partnership Agreements between 2008 and 2011. Most interviews were conducted with trade representatives from West Africa and the Caribbean region in 2008 based in Brussels, while four interviews were carried out over the phone with representatives based in the West African region. Second, it draws on the supplementary analysis of official statements by the regions' trade representatives, such as communications, speeches and quotations in the press. Third, secondary and policy literature is considered to complement subjective perceptions with more objective analysis. A case study approach is adopted to increase the generalisability of the insights regarding the effects of trusting or mistrusting attitudes on negotiating behaviour.

Trust in the International Relations literature

The literature in International Relations tends to refer to the concept of trust in terms of the willingness to take risks concerning the behaviour of others (Hoffman, 2002, p. 375). Understanding international cooperation in line with game-theoretical models, trust is regarded as the belief that the other will reciprocate cooperation instead of defecting. Trust therefore implies the risk that the other will act opportunistically. It is dependent on the perceived predictability of the other's behaviour, deriving from the assumptions about the other's preferences. In a one-shot version of the Prisoner's Dilemma game, in which player 1 decided to trust the other player and to cooperate, player 2 is likely to defect because his or her payoff would be maximised by choosing to cheat. In a repeated game, player 2 will honour the trust of player 1 placed in cooperation if the present value of the payoffs from cooperation

exceeds the present value of the payoffs from detection followed by punishment (Gibbons, 1997, p. 137). Given perfect information, mutual trust to reciprocate cooperation in an iterated game may be entirely rational behaviour, which maximises both parties' benefits. Introducing the more realistic assumptions of imperfect information and bounded rationality, the decision whether or not to trust the other party becomes less clear-cut. The decision to trust then becomes dependent upon the actor's willingness to take on the risk that the other player's pay-off structure might lead to defection, which is essentially 'strategic trust' (Uslaner, 2002, p. 17; Rathbun, 2012, p. 5). If reciprocating trust requires the other actor to neglect rational utility-maximising self-interests, he will not do so.

Hoffmann and Kydd, two important scholars that have explicitly written on trust in International Relations, attempt to broaden the definition of trust beyond the game-theoretical notion of risk. They regard trusting behaviour as predicated on the perceptions of the others' motives. In this understanding, 'something more than a willingness to gamble on the behaviour of others must characterise the trust relationship' (Hoffman, 2002, 381). For Hoffmann (2002), the concept of obligation marks the particular characteristics of trusting relationships. In this view, trusting another actor creates the obligation to honour this trust, in spite of the capacity to do harm (Messick and Kramer, 2001; Hoffman, 2002). Hoffmann (2002, p. 375) states that 'recognising that trust involves particular beliefs about the motivations of others distinguishes it from the broader category of risk and enables trusting relationships to be identified more precisely' (emphasis added). However, he does not clarify which factors influence the particular beliefs about the other's motivations. Kydd (2000) defines trust 'as a belief that the other side is likely to be trustworthy.' He leaves unclear, however, what precisely defines 'trustworthiness', apart from the vague belief that the other actor will not exploit but reciprocate the trustors' cooperative offer. While he acknowledges that 'there is little doubt that state identity affects state preferences, and, hence, the extent to which a state is trustworthy or not' (Kydd, 2005, p. 21), it remains unclear how he integrates identity relationships into the rationalist model of 'Bayesian realism' that he develops.

Booth and Wheeler (2008) argue in *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* in favour of a more relational understanding of trust. They highlight that empathy is crucial in elaborating trust (Booth and Wheeler, 2009, p. 237). Trust derives from the empathetic responsiveness to the other, based on the awareness that other states might act out of fear rather than malevolence (Booth and Wheeler, 2009, pp. 55-56). Their analysis, however, is deeply rooted in the realist literature regarding the security dilemma, and is thus not easily applicable to cooperation in policy fields traditionally inquired by regime theory, such as international trade relations. Rathbun (2012) argues in favour of a concept of 'generalized trust' that complements the rationalist understanding of 'strategic trust'. This perspective builds on psychological approaches and sees a trusting attitude as 'a trait of particular individuals' (Rathbun, 2012, p. 5). It remains questionable, however, how far this approach can be applied to the relations between states rather than individuals.

Constructivist International Relations scholars have only indirectly, or marginally, dealt with the concept of trust. Wendt prominently argues that interaction between states constitutes the kind of identity relationship they have, such as being 'friends' or 'enemies' (Wendt, 1999, p. 341). Trust evolves as the result of collective identity formation (Ibid, p. 359). It is, however, only dealt with marginally in an attempt to better understand structural changes in the international system. Risse also acknowledges that trust serves 'as a precondition for reaching cooperative solutions to dilemma situations' (Risse, 2000, p. 13). Trust, however, is reduced to being dependent on 'argumentative rationality', through which consensus and collective understandings evolve (Ibid.). In particular, Risse (2000) refers to the importance of building trust in the authenticity of speech acts. Some sophisticated examples of conceptualising trust in International Relations are articulated in the sub-field of

International Political Economy about the role of trust in currency exchange relations between state and market actors (Aykens, 2005) and the principle of mutual recognition regarding the provision of services in the EU common market (Nicolaidis, 2007). However, given the particular focus on theories within International Political Economy, none of these approaches provide for a conceptual framework that situates the concept of trust within theories of international cooperation.

The dominance of game-theoretically informed approaches to trust within International Relations therefore leads to a bias towards a focus on the strategic dimension of trust for international cooperation. A rationalist understanding of trust helps us to model the strategic dilemmas that emerge in situations of uncertainty, including the decision of whether or not to trust each other (see for instance Kydd, 2005). At the same time, however, it becomes apparent that such approaches face difficulties in fully explaining what it is that determines whether or not states trust each other (Michel, 2013, p. 873). In the rationalist view, which Hoffmann (2002) and Kydd (2000, 2005) generally adhere to, trust is regarded as an exogenous product of calculation about the ‘dependability’ or ‘reliability’ of the other, based on information about the trustee’s expected behaviour as well as the success of past interaction (Zucker, 1986). This view is based on the premises of methodological individualism and an instrumental conception of rationality. The focus on the given strategic situation and the level of information that actors hold about it, however, fails to capture the multi-faceted nature of trusting relationships, and seems to be a more adequate description of confidence.² They equate trust with the instrumental calculations in situations of uncertainty rather than moral, and partly emotionally, grounded judgements about trustworthiness (Michel, 2013, p. 881-882). Even Risse, adhering to the constructivist school, ultimately situates trust within the narrow confines of rational reasoning, as argued above (Risse, 2000, p. 13).

Approaches from other disciplines within the social sciences have long emphasised that trust does not only hold a cognitive, or ‘rational’, but also an emotional or ‘affective’ dimension. While rationalist models are able to integrate emotions as ‘inputs’ into their decision-making models by ranking the actor’s preferences (Mercer, 2005, p. 94), those approaches that attempt to integrate trust into International Relations seem to favour a cognitive approach that focuses on ‘cold’ risk calculation about the costs and benefits of trusting or mistrusting behaviour (Rathbun, 2012, p. 13). Scholars from other disciplines, however, have long taken the notion of trust beyond the boundaries of rationalist perspectives. Social psychological and sociological approaches in particular have developed a deeper understanding about both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of trust, including its causal nature, as explained in the following.

The concept of trust in social psychology

Many scholars from other disciplines of the social sciences reject a concept of trust that is limited to ‘rational machinations of autonomous, calculating individuals’ (Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Gambetta, 1988; Williamson, 1993) arguing that trust is ‘essentially social and normative’ (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p. 976). The following section briefly elaborates how the insights from social psychology, and its uses in studies of organisations and in management processes, can enrich our understanding of the role of trust in International Relations. Social psychology was chosen because trust research originated from this discipline.

First, it is argued that game-theoretical accounts of trust as predictability and expectations about the other’s behaviour cannot fully explain the willingness of the trustor to take risks because they are limited to rational, cognitive determinants of trusting behaviour (Twyman and Harvey et al, 2008). By framing trust in predictive terms, ‘the game theory approach to trust so far neglects important aspects of the relationship between the trust-giver and the trust-recipient’ (Koeszegi, 2004, p. 647). In

accordance with Weinstock (1999), Koeszegi argues that the relationship itself is central for trust building, rather than the relation between the trustee and what is entrusted to her. Grounding trust in social characteristics allows these scholars to overcome the above-mentioned difficulties in pointing out conditions for 'trust in motives'. Most common is the reference to benevolence and integrity as determinants of 'trustworthiness' (Dirks and Ferrin, 2004; Williams, 2001, p. 386; Twyman and Harvey et al, 2008; Abrams et al, 2003). Benevolence, in particular, seems to be a relevant indicator for 'trust in motives', as it is directly related to intentions. Indicators of benevolence include goodwill and caring (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001, p. 469).

Second, beyond the concept of benevolence-based trust, social psychologists have long promoted the concept of inter-subjectively constituted 'identification-based trust' or 'affective trust' (Shapiro, 1987, p. 623; McAllister, 1995) predicated on a high degree of identification with the trustee (Wilson, 2000, p. 5; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Tanis and Postmes, 2005; Shapiro and Sheppard et al, 1992; Fisman and Khanna, 1990). In doing so, they emphasise the emotional dimension that complements a cognitive account of trust. Shared values, perceived similarities, sympathy and a common vision increase trust. Identities are regarded as interwoven, and the trustor recognises 'the self in the other' (De Cremer and Stouten, 2003). In its deepest manifestation, identification-based trust relies on the assumption of 'a shared sense of community with a common fate' (Rousseau and Sitkin et al, 1998, p. 401). It thus resembles Deutsch's understanding of cooperation within a security community, based on a "we-feeling", trust, and mutual consideration' (Deutsch, 1986, p. 36). As social psychology research confirms, the 'process of self-other merging can be considered as a very useful way to activate the process of installing a goal of mutual cooperation' (De Cremer and Tyler et al, 2005, p. 396; see also Shapiro and Sheppard et al, 1992, p. 373). A shared goal of cooperation ensures actors that both parties 'make decisions that are in *each other's* interests (Shapiro and Sheppard et al, 1992, p. 372, emphasis in original or added – please note here). Recent empirical evidence in the social psychology literature supports the presence of a causal link between affective identification and cooperative behaviour (Kim and Mauborgne, 1993; Pinto and Pinto et al, 1993), thereby rendering an identity-based conceptualization of trust relevant for International Relations research.

In examining these driving forces of trust – attributions of benevolence and identification – social psychological approaches point at the importance of 'interactions between actors rather than to the actors themselves which calls for an analysis of interaction processes and patterns' (Koeszegi, 2004, p. 648; see also Swinith, 1967). Studies in political, legal and organisational settings have for instance widely confirmed that the perception of decision-making processes as fair increases levels of trust (Gilson, 2003; Korsgaard and Schweiger et al, 1995, p. 63; Lind and Tyler, 1988; Brockner and Siegel, 1996, p. 402). Two aspects of the negotiation procedures seem to be particularly relevant to creating trust: consideration of input (Korsgaard and Schweiger et al, 1995, p. 63) and respect (De Cremer and Tyler et al, 2005, p. 399; Brockner and Siegel, 1996, p. 391). Firstly, enabling input is likely to affect feelings of trust towards the decision-maker (Korsgaard, Schweiger and Sapienza, 1995, p. 67). Secondly, respectful treatment influences how valued cooperative partners feel (De Cremer and Tyler et al, 2005, p. 399), and the feeling of being treated as a legitimate, respected partner strengthens trust in the other group members (Korsgaard and Schweiger et al, 1995, p.67).

To summarise, studies of trust in social psychology highlight that trust is a social concept that is not only driven by cognitive risk calculations, but partly holds an emotional dimension. The trustworthiness of other actors is predicated on the perception of benevolence and goodwill. Moreover, the higher the degree of identification between the actors, the deeper the level of trust based on shared values, goals and a common vision. Trust is further strengthened if decision-making procedures are perceived as fair and actors feel respected.

Conceptual Departures: Relational Trust and International Cooperation

Building upon the above-mentioned conceptualisations of trust in International Relations and the insights from social psychology, this paper develops a constructivist understanding of ‘relational trust’.³

Trust is widely defined as ‘the expectation that a partner will not engage in opportunistic behaviour, even in the face of counter-veiling short-term opportunities and incentives’ (Nooteboom, 2004, p. 509). I rely on this definition, adding in reference to Tyler (2003, p. 559) that the expectation of the other’s behaviour is not grounded in calculations of predictability, but conceptions of the identity relationship between the parties. It differs from rationalist approaches mainly in that it relies on a social rather than an individualist ontology. All explicit conceptualisations of trust within the discipline of International Relations, in particular within the regime theory, tend to be based on an individualist ontology and methodological individualism. The lacking tendency in International Relations theories to conceptualise trust based on a non-rationalist social understanding is unfortunate given the previously outlined limitations of a rationalist understanding of trust.

What are the main features of a constructivist perspective on trust in International Relations and what is its added value? ‘Relational trust’ implies an inter-subjective nature of trust, being dependent on assumptions about the relationship with other actors, which is constituted not only through cognitive, but also affective, identity-based interaction processes. Conceptualisations of ‘relational trust’ build on the various social psychological notions of ‘affective trust’, ‘identification-based trust’ or ‘benevolence-based trust’, all of which are endogenously dependent on the social nature of the relations between actors. It goes beyond social psychology by adhering to a social ontological perspective on trust according to which these notions of trust cannot ultimately be reduced to the characteristics of individuals. Instead, it relies more on a social ontology closer to a sociological understanding of trust, according to which ‘trust must be conceived as a property of collective units [...] trust is applicable to the relations among people rather than to their psychological states taken individually’ (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p. 968). It thereby differs from mainstream rationalist approaches that relate ‘strategic trust’ primarily to a given situation structure as determined by the actors’ interests and the level of information they hold about it. It also parts with Rathbun’s concept of generalised trust in International Relations, which builds on social psychological accounts and links trust to the disposition features of individual decision-makers (Rathbun, 2011, p. 36). Instead, relational trust is the product of particular identity relationships that develop over time.⁴

It should be noted that a presupposition for integrating the concept of trust into International Relations is the assumption that states as international actors trust or mistrust each other. Authors such as Kelman caution that ‘the behaviour of such a large collective as a nation [...] cannot be considered a direct reflection of the motives and personal feelings of either its citizens or its leaders’ (Kelman, quoted in Dougherty, Pfaltzgraff and Robert, 2001, p. 193). Constructivism seems most suitable to address these concerns because it locates trust at the level of state identity, based on the ‘assumption that states have [...] emotional relationships, and identities to enact and preserve’ (Crawford, 2002, p. 154). While human psychology seems intuitively to be closest to the concept of trust, constructivism arguably offers a bridge between states as actors in international politics, and the individuals that interact in international settings. As argued by Lewis and Weigert, ‘in the case of state-to-state interaction individuals take on a role/a larger identity of a state that shapes their understandings of trustworthiness’ (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p. 976). This assumption makes it possible to abstract from the level of the individual, whose feelings do not necessarily reflect the positions of states. At the same time, it allows us to retain parts of the intuition that trust is a personal attribute rather than a structural feature of a situation, as reflected in the larger social identities that states take on.⁵

Regarding the causal nature of relational trust, identity itself is the key driving force that affects cooperation processes either through attributions of benevolent motives or through processes of identification (cf. Rathbun, 2012, p. 39). In the following, this paper refers to these two dimensions of relational trust as ‘benevolence-based trust’ and ‘identification-based trust’.⁶ In terms of its causal effects, relational trust differs from the rationalist and social psychological approaches that presume a one-way relationship between the level of trust and the willingness to cooperate. Relational trust and identities, however, are mutually constitutive in the sense that interaction, and the concepts of self and other that it gives rise to, define what trustworthy behaviour would look like in the first place. Once a trusting relationship is established, high levels of trust can partly substitute for the uncertainty and eases negotiating processes. A historically established identity relationship that suggests friendly interaction patterns, for instance, leads to the attribution of well-intentioned motives, and may off-set risk-averse behaviour in the face of uncertainty. In addition to the cognitive dimension that such risk assessment entails, relational trust also encompasses the emotional driving forces of trust that social psychological approaches point to. Identity relationship inherently holds an emotional dimension. Social constructivist approaches seem particularly suitable for integrating the so far mostly neglected affective, emotional dimension of trust into International Relations. As noted by Mercer, ‘by putting emotion back into concepts such as trust it is possible to use the emotion in identity and in trust to address collective action problems’ (Mercer, 2006, p. 298). Identity relations also affect international cooperation because they can ease or obstruct interaction during negotiation processes. This is because, as previously argued, high levels of identification-based trust make it more likely that the parties behave in accordance with mutual interests (Shapiro and Sheppard et al, 1992, p. 372) and are able to agree on shared goals and negotiating principles (De Cremer and Tyler et al, 2005, p. 396). If actors lack such shared understandings, it increases the likelihood of conflict, delay and politicisation, especially if grounded in normative disagreements (Weinhardt, 2013).

Such an understanding goes beyond rationalist understandings of trust that focus on strategic calculations of trustworthiness in situations of uncertainty. Rationalist approaches tend to understate the process-related dimension of trust and its importance for establishing an atmosphere at the negotiating table that is conducive to cooperation. In particular, we may fail to see that relational trust and mistrust are pervasive phenomena in international politics that shape the conditions for interaction in the first place. In contrast to rationalist assumptions, moreover, not all actors will necessarily hold similar beliefs about the other side’s trustworthiness if given the same pieces of information. If relational trust (or mistrust) is present, we would expect that identical behaviour gives rise to different perceptions of trustworthiness dependent on the respective actors’ framing of the relationship. This is because the historically created identity relationship between the actors, which cannot be reduced to structural determinants, partly constitutes what trustworthy behaviour would look like in the first place. It is important, however, to bear in mind that trust itself is a multi-faceted concept that affects the willingness of states to cooperate in different ways. Actors may rely on strategic, generalised and/or relational trust in their interactions (cf. Rathbun, 2012, p. 30). These modes of reasoning can complement or offset each other, but they are not equal. If we neglect the presence of identity-based trust or mistrust, we may miss an important part of the picture. Even Kydd, adherent of the realist school, acknowledges that ‘[a] complete understanding of trust in international relations must integrate realist analysis of international strategic interaction with other theories of preference and identity formation offered by nonrealist theories’ (Kydd, 2005, p. 22). The following table provides an overview of the concept of relational trust, and its differences from existing approaches to trust within International Relations (see table 1).

- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE -

Methodologically, the study of trust faces several challenges due to its hardly quantifiable nature. Understanding trust as an inter-subjective variable implies that we need to pay attention to the actors' particular identity conceptions to understand why and when trust is present (or absent) in a particular relationship, and how it affects cooperation processes. It requires us to base the empirical analysis on an examination of 'the sense of identity people derive from their relationships' (Tyler and DeGoey, 1996, p. 338) rather than the conduct of a presumably objective assessment of the trustworthiness of the actors involved. Official government statements, as well as statements made by individual trade officials that refer to their role as state representatives, will therefore be examined to make inferences about the level of trust, understood as a collective rather than a personal attribute.

This paper proposes to rely on two proxies to identify whether or not relational trust was present: first, evidence of the relevant actors' views of the other side as benevolent, altruistic or cooperative in official statements or qualitative interviews (cf. Rathbun, 2012, p. 45) serves as an indicator of benevolence-based trust. Mistrust would be associated with attributions of malevolent, self-interested and uncooperative motives. Second, evidence that decision-makers regarded the other side's negotiating behaviour as fair or respectful indicates the presence of identification-based trust. On the contrary, concerns about negotiating behaviour as unfair or disrespectful indicate that identification-based trust was low. Shared values, perceived similarity, sympathy or a common vision facilitate identification more generally, and therefore the emergence of identification-based trust. Again, text-based analysis that makes use of official sources and interview data will be used to make inferences. In the particular case of trade negotiations between the EU and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific states, most of which were former European colonies, particular attention will be paid to the acceptance or rejection of the frame of 'colonialism/neo-colonialism' in the relationship between the actors. Adherence to this frame would arguably be constitutive of a relationship that is dominated by mistrust rather than trust between the actors.

It is very difficult to single out the effects of trust on cooperation processes. This is because trust (or mistrust) is only one out of many factors that impact upon international cooperation⁷. To assess whether or not trust could have been relevant among them, it is important to place the empirical case under consideration in the context of the stakes that the actors faced (Rathbun, 2012, p. 11-12). The extent to which trust affects outcomes in international cooperation is, first of all, predicated on the condition that behavioural risks are present. As Lysons and Mehta (1997) state, trust in a situation of uncertainty is 'a meaningful concept [...] only if at least one party is exposed to an element of behavioral risk.'⁸ The higher the perceived behavioural risk, the more likely it is to be important whether actors trust or mistrust each other. This implies, second, that trust as a factor that influences the willingness to cooperate does not necessarily affect all cooperation partners in the same way. Choosing comparative cases in which the behaviour of one of the cooperation partners is constant allows us to focus on variation in the other partner's perceptions. In contrast to rationalist conceptions of strategic trust, we would expect that two actors with different identity conceptions assessed the trustworthiness of the same cooperation partners differently, even if they are in structurally similar positions.

In order to examine the expected causal effects of trusting or mistrusting relationships it becomes necessary to rely on indirect indicators. This is because, as 'we cannot go into people's minds' to find out true causes, it becomes necessary to rely on interpretation (Fierke, 2007, p. 176). Congruence analysis (George and Bennett, 2005, pp. 178-179) will be used to assess how far contextualising the EPA negotiation process against the actors' potentially divergent levels of trust helps us to make sense of their negotiating behaviour. Benevolence-based trust is likely to be congruent with the observation

of a high willingness to take risks despite the presence of uncertainty. This step requires us to analyse both the actual behaviour of states as well as the reasons for which they were presumably taken, as indicated in public statements and interviews. The presence of identification-based trust is expected to correlate with relatively easy negotiation processes, as evidenced by the absence of politicisation or delays. Counterfactual arguments help to support the assessment of whether or not higher or lower levels of identification-based trust could have made it more or less possible for a shared understanding of the negotiating principles to emerge, while also avoiding the delays associated with politicisation.

Trust and Mistrust in the Economic Partnership Agreement Negotiations

The EPA negotiations need to be situated against the context of power asymmetries between the EU and the ACP countries. On the economic level, Europe is not only Africa's biggest trading partner, but also by far the biggest public donor of development aid. Given the different levels of development, the European Commission clearly stated that the EPAs should above all serve as 'tools for development' (EC, 2009). As a further elaboration of this approach, David O'Sullivan, Director General of External Trade of the European Commission (EC), argued that

‘I am a trade negotiator – normally a mercantilist profession! But DG Trade does not approach these negotiations in the usual way, where we seek to gain economic advantage from each other. This is clearly not the objective with the ACP. Our objective with you is to build on our privileged relationship and to secure and improve your market access into the EU, in order to serve a wider development goal’ (EC, 2007).

Paying tribute to this special relationship, the EPAs were to be more than just classic trade relations. The EU's official approach contrasted sharply with most other cases of North-South free trade agreements, in which it is not uncommon for both sides to openly follow economic objectives. Whether or not these declarations seemed trustworthy is an open question. The following sections will examine the role of trust or mistrust in the EU in the EPA negotiations with the West African and the Caribbean regions.

Lack of Trust in the EPA negotiations: The West African Case

This section examines the degree of trust in the EPA negotiations between the West African region and the EU. It shows that a distinct lack of trust, shaped by an understanding of the relationship with the European counterpart with regard to the history of colonialism, was then reinforced by the style of interaction at the negotiating table and the perceived lack of recognition between the actors. It affected negotiations by making the West African side less inclined to take risks in the face of uncertainty, while also contributing to high levels of politicisation and delay in the negotiation process. In particular, the tendency to mistrust the EU was based on assumptions about the other's motives that echoed perceptions about the colonial past. The mistrust that was present can therefore only partially be captured by the rationalist concept of strategic trust that focuses on cognitive calculations about the level of information available about each other's expected behaviour, given that it was interwoven with a particular identity-based framing of the relationship that shaped interpretations of distrustful behaviour patterns in the first place.

Mistrusting the EU: Echoes of Colonialism

Historical memories, the perceived lack of fair negotiating procedures and the absence of equal status recognition crucially undermined trust on the West African side. Perceptions about the historically constituted relationship undermined trust in the EU's declaration to pursue well-intentioned

development objectives in the EPA negotiations. Many statements reveal that the history of colonialism was invoked as a frame of reference for assessing the other side's motives – a judgement that was indicative of mistrust. Professor Chibuzo N. Nwoke from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs for instance concluded at a regional workshop on the EPAs that the 'EPA is a neo-colonial tool designed to enable the EU have better access to ACP markets and further impoverish their economies' (MAN/NESG, 2008). A trade official involved in the EPA process echoed this fear of 'neo-colonial' intrusion, saying in an interview that the EU's intention behind the negotiations was to break up regional integration efforts: 'if ECOWAS breaks off it is because of EU – and that is what the EU is after. On paper the EU supports regional integration, in practice EU does things that waste integration'. A Senegalese government official highlighted in 2008 in an interview that regarding the EPA negotiations, 'some people say the EU is re-colonising Africa'. There were, however, also dissenting perspectives. One negotiator said, for instance, that 'the institution [the EU] strongly believes that it [the proposed EPA] is development-oriented'. Others argued that 'they have a firm belief that what they are doing and how they are negotiating is really for our interest' or that 'bad intentions are not the problem'. Yet, a high number of trade policy representatives stated without hesitation that they perceived the EU as pursuing its own market access interests above all. While not all trade officials consulted explicitly referred to the colonial past, it was an important narrative that was picked up in the public sphere. Politicised and highly emotional claims were made in the public media about the EU's allegedly 'neo-colonial' attitude (Monitor Online, 2008).

Another trigger of high levels of suspicion towards the other side's claims to be genuinely interested in promoting development was the style of interaction at the negotiating table. Low levels of trust were reinforced by low levels of identification with the European side, and in particular the perceived lack of a mutual status at the negotiating table. A West African trade official working at his country's embassy in Brussels argued in an interview in 2009 that there was a wide gap of understanding between both sides, which indicated a lack of identification with the other's values:

'EPA is not only about trade, it is about politics and culture. West African and European cultures are quite different; it is a matter of understanding. [...] It is about understanding our system, our culture. But nobody seems to understand the other.'

When asked in what ways negotiating with the EU was different from negotiating with a country in the region, the lower levels of identification with the EU became apparent again. A capital-based trade official in West Africa argued in a phone interview in 2008 that 'we have confidence in the relations with our regional partners [...]. We have shared interests, shared values and shared beliefs. To that extent we are a bit more comfortable.'

Mutual status recognition that could have increased the levels of identification-based trust was undermined partly by the perceived asymmetries in negotiation capacity. A West African trade representative based in Brussels complained in 2008 that you 'sit opposite counterparts who can recall 10 years of negotiations on an issue at a moment's notice - we don't have the capacity to do that, and the time to prepare to come for a negotiation is not there'. Another West African interviewee based in Brussels likewise argued that 'they have more knowledge, more information, more expertise and more on the table to offer'. It must be noted that there were dissenting perspectives, in particular at the level of the ECOWAS Secretariat, at which individuals held strong technical expertise – despite a general shortage of financial resources. One ECOWAS official working in the EPA Unit, for instance, stated in an interview that

‘we tend to believe that we perhaps know our interests better than they may do. So although we acknowledge that they believe they have sound technical arguments, we believe having lived here and living here on a permanent basis perhaps we may have a bit more information which they do not’.

Yet, with regard to the West African region in general, the perceived lack of sufficient trade negotiating capacities seemed to be relatively prevalent within the region. This was evident in an assessment that the African Trade Policy Centre (ATPC) carried out in 2007, which pointed at widespread challenges in terms of limited trade negotiation capacities, including a shortage of impact assessment studies and a lack of financial and human resources in the West African region (ATPC, 2007). The ATPC assessment found for instance that ‘[i]t was felt that there was not sufficient capacity in the sub-region to be able to cover the depth neither of various sectoral issues nor of the wide range of topic’ (ATPC, 2007, p. 55).

Moreover, there was a strong perception that the European side was unwilling to recognise the equal status of the West African side at the negotiating table. The way in which Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson conducted the negotiations was described as ‘top-down’ and ‘very rigid’ in one of the interviews with a capital-based trade official. The EU’s negotiating style was seen as ‘tough’ (Hurt et al, 2013). There were also complaints about the EU looking down on and taking advantage of its counterpart. A Nigerian civil society representative who was officially involved in the negotiation process reasoned along these lines when justifying the rejection of the EU’s proposal to use existing money from the European Development Fund (EDF) to cover the adjustment costs in EPA negotiations. He claimed in an interview in 2011 that ‘we are given nothing out of it at the end of the day, because if the EPA was not there you would still have the EDF running. Now the fund of the EDF is transferred and renamed EPADP, so who is fooling who?’ He further complained that ‘don’t we look like fools, are we not looking like fools that have been shortchanged?’ Feelings of a lack of respect from the European side did little to disperse this perception of being treated like ‘fools’. When asked whether the EU’s role in the EPA negotiations could be seen as some kind of a benevolent reform agent, the civil society representative shouted out furiously:

‘Who is reforming who? Must they reform West Africa? Are they saying that all the people in West Africa are fools that [they] cannot reform themselves? I don’t want to hear that kind of trash - that you are coming to reform us ... come on, this is insulting - first of all, solve your own problem there, leave us here’.

This statement draws attention to the ‘insulting’ and highly emotional effect that the lack of equal status recognition has had on the West African side – which clearly undermined identification-based trust to emerge between the partners. It echoes concerns about paternalistic patterns that often characterise the interactions of the ‘North’ with the ‘South’ in international cooperation (Doty, 1996).

To understand where these low levels of trust came from, it is important to take in account the identity conceptions that informed them, which cannot be reduced to ‘objective’ calculative judgements about the other side’s trustworthiness. The structural characteristics of EU-West Africa trade relations are defined by huge power asymmetries. The European Union, the largest export market in the world, faced a region in which 12 out of 16 countries are classified as so-called Least Developed Countries. The meaning that actors in the West African region gave to these existing asymmetries was partly shaped by conceptions of their identities as unequal partners, which follow from the colonial and post-colonial past. It was argued on the West African side that ‘[t]he EPA negotiations exist within a framework of two distinct political groups of vastly different power. [...] It

is a 'partnership' between donors and debtors, between benefactors and consistent dependencies, and between former colonial empires and their former colonies' (IPS, 2008).

The strong reactions to a perceived lack of respect from the European side, moreover, need to be seen against the colonial legacies that continue to shape identity relationships in international relations (see Young, 2009). As Young (2009, p. 32) reminds us, 'in innumerable ways, colonial subjugation in Africa brought not only political oppression and economic exploitation but also profound psychological humiliation'. This does not imply that trade officials interviewed perceived the West African side's role as being 'dependent' on or 'inferior' to the EU. However, it arguably made representatives more likely to place high importance on mutual status recognition at the negotiating table as an expression of the desire to overcome the colonial past. It at the same time shaped what trust or mistrust would look like - the perception that interaction at the negotiating table was reminiscent of tactics used during the colonial times, for instance, reinforced suspicion towards the EU. The EU's negotiation tactics were strongly perceived as 'divide and rule' strategies similar to those employed by the former colonial masters. A Senegalese government official made the argument in an interview in 2008 that the 'EU wanted to divide our countries to impose a position – this is not a good thing, and our president was really angry.' Similarly, Talla Fall, 'chargé d'affaires' of the Senegalese Embassy in Brussels, bluntly stated that 'African states had been divided up as had been done in colonial times' (Afrol News, 2008).

How the Lack of Trust Shaped the EU-ECOWAS Negotiations

The EU and the West African side failed to conclude the regional free trade agreement by the end of 2007 – the originally envisaged negotiating deadline. Whether or not the relatively low levels of trust in the EU mattered during this period of EPA negotiations depends, first of all, partly on the presence of perceived behavioural risks. The empirical analysis shows that those risks were perceived as being high. They stemmed from the high degree of uncertainty that the West African side faced. West African trade negotiators were often not in a position to objectively assess the costs and benefits deriving from the EPA due to capacity constraints. Economic impact assessments, if conducted, showed ambiguous results. An impact assessment of the EPA on Sierra Leone concluded for instance that '[l]ike other ECOWAS countries, Sierra Leone faces an enormous challenge in view of the likely impact of the EPA with the EU and considering the alternative policy options available. A final decision has to be taken under a high degree of uncertainty' (Olympio et al, 2006, p. 8). Trade negotiation capacity constraints reinforced the lack of clarity concerning predictable costs and benefits of cooperation. At the national level, it was lamented by a government official in West Africa in a phone interview in 2008 that 'we don't really understand the issues and opportunities. There is a lack of adequate information and [...] it also is a problem of coordination.' Signing the EPA was therefore perceived as involving considerable risks because it promised to restructure the region's trade relations with the EU with hardly predictable consequences.

We would expect, first of all, that low levels of trust reinforced the region's reluctance to sign an EPA in the face of uncertain benefits. While it is difficult to ascertain a correlation between the region's mistrust and the outcome of the negotiations, we did indeed see a decreasing willingness of West African negotiators to sign an agreement in the run-up to the 2007 deadline. The region started off in 2002 with a declaration of its intention to sign a regional EPA, but developed a highly critical stance during the course of the negotiations. It seemed that, initially, the EPAs were being perceived 'primarily as a good opportunity', as a West African trade official based in Brussels put it in a 2009 interview, even though no sufficient impact assessments of the costs and benefits had been carried out at that time. Yet, it seems that the EU's 'top-down' negotiating style increased suspicion towards its claims to genuinely care about the ACPs development. A West African representative based in the

region argued along these lines in 2009, stating that the EU's tendency to use its power to impose certain positions in the negotiations was not reassuring, especially with respect to potential benefits deriving from the EPAs:

'The disposition of the EU to impose certain elements in the negotiation (trade in services, investment and competition [...]) does not provide much reassurance. The EPA ultimately appears to be not more than an optimistic bet on the future. It's up to the EU to dispel that perception.' (translated from French by the author)

As a consequence, a capital-based trade official argued that 'in the course of the negotiations people got second thoughts'. Sir John Kaputin, the Secretary-General of the ACP Secretariat, was reported to have declared in 2008 that 'it is when we get to the negotiation table that we realize that there is a great gulf between the rhetoric and actual practice' (ACP, 2008). These statements match the observed hardening of the regional negotiation position towards the 2007 deadline, and illustrate the way in which mistrusting the EU increased the West African region's unwillingness to take on the risks associated with signing the agreement. The way in which mistrust served as an obstacle to cooperation was also acknowledged by the EU – not only with respect to the EPA negotiations with the West African region, but also regarding the other regions that failed to sign the agreement by the end of 2007. Karel de Gucht, Trade Commissioner since 2010, for instance publicly lamented in a speech on the EU's trade policy towards developing countries '[t]he mistrust of, and downright opposition to our Economic Partnership Agreements' (EC, 2010b).

We would also expect that low levels of identification-based trust make it more likely for politicisation and delays to emerge during the negotiating process. In the West African case, the 'stormy negotiations' (Afrol News, 2008) became indeed highly politicised. The EPAs were compared to a 'thorn' in the relationship and a 'divisive force' between the partners (ECDPM, 2010), and West African NGOs formed a network to collectively lobby to 'stop the EPAs' (Trommer, 2011; Del Felipe, 2014), all of which made it more difficult to reach an agreement. The Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, who was highly critical of the proposed agreements, was for example instrumental in organising a political demonstration against the EPAs in front of the European Commission. Out of the 3000 people who gathered to protest with slogans such as 'No to EPAs, Yes to DPAs [Development Partnership Agreements]', a large number came from Senegal (EEPA, 2008). President Wade allegedly provided money for a number of the Senegalese protesters to be flown into Brussels.

The low levels of identification between the partners arguably also made it difficult to settle some of the disagreements over the key negotiation principle, the proclaimed 'development dimension', which contributed to the increased politicisation of the negotiations. Alavi, Gibbon et al (2007) similarly made the argument that '[t]he root cause of the controversies is different perspectives on how EPAs are to become tools for Development' (p. 88). The West African negotiators linked the development dimension to the inclusion of additional financial resources (Meyn, 2008, p. 3). On the contrary, the European Commission perceived the development dimension in terms of trade and trade-related policies. Agreement on a joint definition of the development dimension was not simply a technical matter, but predicated on the actors' interpretation of their identity relationship in the negotiations. As a result of not perceiving the relations between the negotiating partners as equal, the Brussels-based West African trade official argued for instance that the 'EU could be more understanding because we are not at the same level of development'. The lack of trust built during the negotiations, then, amplified the difficulties of agreeing on the key negotiation principle, the development dimension.

As a counterfactual argument, higher levels of identification-based trust could have made it ‘more possible for a shared strategic focus and sustained consensus to evolve’ (Shapiro and Sheppard et al, 1992, p. 373) while also avoiding the delays associated with politicisation. The EU itself acknowledged in an internal reflection paper on the obstacles in the EPA negotiations that it needs a new negotiation strategy; one that would among other things focus on building ‘two-way trust’ to overcome the obstacles in the EPA process, for instance through ‘improved communication and mutual understanding’ (EC, 2010a, p. 3). While higher levels of trust do not render the conflict of interests that underpin international negotiations irrelevant, they arguably would have made it more likely that they could be “negotiated away”. Actors become more cooperative, are more likely to understand each other’s positions, and less likely to see the need to politicise and thereby delay negotiations. The perception of shared interests, shared values and shared beliefs creates trust in the other actor’s motives, and the other actor in turn is more likely to be regarded as following shared objectives and goals. A rationalist analysis that disregards the effects of trust (or mistrust) on international negotiations therefore fails to fully understand why the negotiations became politicised over time, and how mistrust reinforced the region’s reluctance to accept the EPA.

Trust in the EPA Negotiations: the Caribbean Case

In comparison to the ECOWAS case, this section illustrates a case in which higher levels of trust impacted upon the EPA negotiation process. In the Caribbean case, a good negotiation atmosphere was built on close relations between the European Commission officials and the region’s negotiating body. In particular, paying attention to the greater inclination to frame the identity relationship in terms of a trade partnership rather than with regard to echoes of the colonial past helps us to understand why the EU’s behaviour was interpreted differently, and led to different reactions. Identification with the other side’s role as an equal trade negotiator created a sense of security that the EU was following shared goals and objectives. This enabled a much smoother negotiating process. In contrast to the West African case, the EU’s negotiating behaviour did not lead to feelings of resentment among the key negotiators, high levels of politicisation or major delays. The European side’s ‘tough’ bargaining stance was regarded as unavoidable in trade negotiations, while negotiators felt much more respected. Paying attention to the way in which trust depended on the actor’s particular conception of the identity relationship between the partners shows that a constructivist approach can shed new light on our understanding of trust in International Relations.

Trusting the EU: identification as trade partners

In contrast to the West African case, identification between the partners contributed to higher levels of trust at the negotiating table – despite the perception of the EU as not pursuing benevolent motives. The Caribbean side, led by its key negotiating team, understood the relationship much more in terms of a trade partnership and was less inclined to refer to the colonial past. The identity relationship shaped what trust or mistrust would look like in the first place. The Caribbean side’s perspective made representatives more likely to recognise shared goals and principles in their interactions with the EU, in contrast to framing the relationship in terms of (neo)colonialism. Convergence of both side’s ideological beliefs about the effects of free trade on economic growth further facilitated identification. A rationalist perspective that points primarily at the level of information and a given constellation of interests cannot fully grasp why many trade officials on the Caribbean side perceived the EU and the way in which it negotiated as being much closer to their own goals and principles compared to the West African case.

Framing the negotiation process much more in terms of a trade partnership led to much higher levels of identification with the EU’s goals and approach, which is considered to be a driver of trust

(Tyler, 2006, p. 155). One interviewee from the Caribbean region, based in Brussels, stressed for instance in 2008 that ‘the trade objectives of larger trading partners are no different from ours, it is just a question of scale’. Another Brussels-based Caribbean trade official argued that ‘I have a job to do, you have a job to do’, thereby putting both parties at the negotiation table on an equal level. Bishop, Heron and Payne similarly underline the high levels of identification between the partners in their finding that ‘there was significant intellectual and technical overlap between its [the Caribbean negotiating body’s] staff and the EU negotiating team’ (Bishop et al, 2012, p. 19). There was a feeling that the two sides shared the same approach in the negotiations, which arguably increased trust in the other’s motives based on mutual understanding.

Trade officials from the region only rarely referred to the colonial and post-colonial past when framing their relationship with the EU in the EPA process. In contrast to the West African case, mistrust based on historical memories of the European side’s imperial past was thus less prevalent. This different framing of the identity relationship reflected an explicit desire to break with the past, which in turn allowed for identification with the other side as equal trading partners. It was striking that the Caribbean representatives were particularly eager to stress the technical trade-related aspects of the negotiations. One interviewee, a Brussels-based trade official from the Caribbean region, explicitly stated in 2008 that ‘I now like to think that the relationship has become more mature, we are no longer donors and recipients. We are mainly negotiating cooperation – financial, technical and commercial’. Dr Bernal, former chief negotiator of the Caribbean region, similarly claimed that ‘in the past, what we really did was to make supplication to Europe, to say: we need a better price, or we need a bigger quota, or we need development assistance. That is no longer the platform, we have to negotiate’ (Jamaican Government, 2008). Unilateral concessions among unequal partners were associated with the past, which representatives from the Caribbean side explicitly wanted to break away from. Jamaica’s Prime Minister Bruce Golding echoed such a view when he argued that

‘there are persons who believe that the preferences that we have enjoyed - this business where Europe pays you twice as much for your sugar than they can buy it elsewhere - that those are things that must remain in perpetuity. [...] It is a kind of mendicancy that we need to purge ourselves of’ (Jamaica Gleaner, 2008).

It should be noted that this perspective does not imply that the Caribbean representatives were unaware of the limits to a partnership of equals given the structural power asymmetries. One interviewee for example argued that the EU and the US could negotiate approximately as equals, ‘but if you’re dealing with the Caribbean clearly we can’t negotiate as equals, and the whole thing is mismatched [...] clearly we are not negotiating as partners’. Another interviewee based in Brussels referred to the region’s ‘position of weakness’, which derives from ‘the problem [that is] the fact that you are small’. Yet, the acknowledgement of structural barriers to a partnership of equals did not undermine the framing of the trade relationship as one between trade partners who hold functionally equal tasks. This perspective was facilitated by the region’s negotiating body’s high level of trade negotiating capacity. The Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM), which led the EPA process on behalf of CARIFORUM, held previous experience in conducting regional trade negotiations. In particular, the CRNM played an important role in all of the region’s previous negotiations of external free trade agreements, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)-Cuba FTA (2000), the CARICOM-Dominican Republic FTA (2001), the CARICOM-Costa Rica FTA (2004) or the currently stalled negotiations of an envisaged Free Trade Area of the Americas (Bernal, 2013, p. 84-85). Regarding its trade negotiating capacity, Bishop, Heron and Payne argue that ‘[o]ne

only has to consider the range and number of reports it produced [...] to understand that the CRNM as an institution was endowed with considerable intellectual capacity, drive and confidence' (Ibid, p. 14).

The presence of higher levels of identification-based trust also became apparent with regard to the different perception of the EU's negotiating style: in contrast to the West African case, the European side's 'tough' negotiating style was rarely portrayed as unfair. Dr Bernal, former chief negotiator of the CRNM, explicitly stated that '[n]obody forced us to do an EPA, and nobody forced us to complete it on any given date' (Jamaican Government, 2008). It was seen as natural that both sides pursued above all economic self-interests. This perspective provides a sharp contrast to the West African side's claims that the EU was dividing its countries to impose a position. The different framing of the relationship in terms of a trade partnership shaped a different perception of the negotiating tactics at stake. Complaints about the EU's negotiation style seemed to have been shrugged off as necessary by-products of the way in which trade negotiations usually unfold. A CARIFORUM official responding to the questionnaire stated for instance that '[the] negotiating style and strategy were agreed to by both parties so if it's flawed I wouldn't want to put the blame on the EU.' While the West African region perceived the EU's insistence on opening up the ACP markets as unfair treatment given their different levels of development, the Caribbean negotiators portrayed the concept of mutual obligation as a necessary step towards entering the 'club' of equal trading partners. The resulting understanding of the relationship in terms of the similar status and the roles of both sides facilitated the emergence of identification-based trust.

Equal status recognition serves as another indicator of identification-based trust, which was present in the Caribbean case. Bishop, Heron and Payne report that there was a stronger feeling among the key negotiating team, and that according to one of its negotiators 'the EU viewed us as worthy interlocutors' (Bishop et al, 2012, p. 19). A CARIFORUM representative similarly stated in an answer to the questionnaire that 'the EC universally recognised that the CARIFORUM negotiators were serious and committed to the negotiating process.' The respondent to the questionnaire moreover claimed that 'by establishing a positive atmosphere in the negotiations, we were always assured of a sympathetic hearing by our EC counterparts'. Identification between the negotiators was strengthened by similar ideological beliefs about the positive effects of neo-liberal trade reforms – rather than development aid – on economic growth (Bishop et al, 2012). Such convergent worldviews reduce uncertainty about the other side's behaviour by reassuring the partners as regards the negotiating principles they adhere to. Both sides shared the understanding that it was necessary to move the EU-ACP trade relationship towards a new paradigm of trade and development. Errol Humphrey, Ambassador of Barbados to the EU, for instance argued that

'[a]fter more than 30 years of duty free and quota free non-reciprocal access to the EU market for Caribbean manufactured and agricultural products, the region had made little progress in exploiting the market opportunities. Therefore, it was clear that we had to do something different - a paradigm shift was necessary' (INTA Committee, 2008).

To understand where this perspective came from, it is important to take a closer look at the group of key trade negotiators that were driving the EPA process within the region. In particular, the CRNM's trade negotiating capacity and its pro-liberalisation stance helps us to understand the region's inclination to opt for this route. The CRNM's perspective on the EPAs' process was not always shared among other trade actors within the region (Bishop et al, 2012), in particular regarding its strong pro-liberalisation stance. Yet, given the high level of autonomy and trade-negotiating capacity of the region's regional negotiating body, it was able to shape the Caribbean region's position on the EPAs. According to Heron, The CRNM, which was set up in 1997, acted as a 'quasi-autonomous body that

led the negotiations on behalf of CARIFORUM [the Caribbean Forum]' (Heron, 2011, p. 2). Its first head, Sir Shridath Ramphal, introduced institutional changes that significantly increased the political mandate of the chief negotiator prior to the EPA process, which 'substantively went well beyond what was initially envisioned in terms of its capacity both to set agendas and to strike deals' (Bishop et al, 2012, p. 13),⁹ which facilitated identification with the European side's neo-liberal agenda that underpinned the EPAs.

It is also important to view the higher levels of identification in the Caribbean case in the context of the historically developed structural position in which many developing countries find themselves. As argued by Ayoob, marginalised countries face the 'schizophrenic' situation in which they on the one hand 'tend to favour [...] structural changes in global economic and political systems to encourage a redistribution of the world's resources and capabilities', and on the other hand, need to seek recognition within the existing system and hold 'vested interests in the preservation of predictable norms of state behaviour' (Ayoob, 1989, p. 70). The Caribbean side's framing of the EPA process primarily in terms of a trade encounter reflects a decision to use the strategy of adjustment to a given set of trading rules to maximise the benefits that are available. As the CRNM put it: '[i]mportantly, the EPA arrangement provides for the establishment of a stable and secure trading environment for goods from the Caribbean' (CRNM webpage, 2009). Higher levels of identification, as indicated by the shared goals pursued, in this way also reflect the necessity to adjust to dominant patterns of trade regulation when acting from a position of marginalization, even if the CRNM was convinced that doing so was at the same time beneficial. Taking a closer look at the Caribbean side's framing of its identity relationship vis-à-vis the EU thus helps us to better understand why it was possible for higher levels of identification-based trust to emerge.

How trust shaped the EU-CARIFORUM negotiations

In contrast to the West African case, the EU and the Caribbean side concluded the regional EPA agreement by the deadline in 2007. In how far the trust element was having an effect on the negotiation process depends, first of all, on the presence of behavioural risks. Similar to the West African case, such risks resulted from uncertainties associated with the conclusion of the EPA agreement, as argued in the following.

The benefits of cooperation were at first sight perceived as clear-cut regardless of the EU's benevolent or competitive intentions. The CRNM, representing the key negotiation team, published for example a document 'The EPA: Fact vs. Fiction', in which the reasons for concluding a comprehensive EPA were stated to have been 'very clear' from an economic point of view (CRNM webpage, 2007). On closer examination, however, ambiguities surrounding the regional interest and perceptions of risk were more evident. It might have been apparent that the region would benefit from a 'goods-only' interim agreement because of the high number of non-LDC countries that would otherwise have lost duty free market access to the EU. The benefits from concluding a comprehensive EPA, including trade in services and investment, however, were ambiguous. On the level of heads of state and ministers, for instance, opinions about the benefits of the comprehensive EPA were notably divergent.¹⁰ Most prominently, Guyana took a very critical stance towards the EPAs, with President Bharrat Jagdeo arguing that the comprehensive EPA 'will [...] seriously prejudice our negotiations with other countries and may jeopardise the future of our integration movement' (Bilaterals.org, 2008). In April 2008, Prime Minister Thompson of Barbados acknowledged for instance that a 'powerful case' was built against signing the comprehensive EPA, which 'constituted an incomplete basis from which to move forward into the [...] unknown world of the 21st century' (quoted in Girvan, 2008). Uncertainties surrounding the regional interest were reinforced by the highly complex nature of the unprecedented agreements (Meyn and Stevens, 2007). For instance, it was stated by a Brussels-

based CARIFORUM representative that ‘trade has evolved significantly and does no longer merely include simple elements like customs. Now it includes [...] highly complex things that require extensive exposure and training – that is one of the challenges we face.’

The conceptual framework of this paper suggests, firstly, that higher levels of trust in the EU among the Caribbean key negotiating team, the CRNM, were able to offset to some extent the perceived risks of signing the agreement. While the region’s decision to sign the EPA before the 2007 deadline cannot be reduced to the effects of identification-based trust, it strengthened the readiness of the key negotiating team to accept the EPA agreement despite remaining uncertainties regarding its benefits. This strong belief in the benefits of a comprehensive regional agreement was facilitated by the ideological convergence between the EU and the CRNM negotiators, which gave both sides a mutually reassuring reference framework about the effects of the envisaged neo-liberal reforms. Uncertainty about the benefits of cooperation where in this way reduced, as reflected in the CRNM’s message that ‘from the Caribbean perspective, the partnership with Europe is expected to position the Region to take advantage of a more dynamic trade and investment relationship’ (CRNM webpage, 2009). Errol Humphrey, Ambassador of Barbados to the EU, similarly claimed that ‘Cariforum perceived that the EPA could be used as an effective mechanism to advance the region’s development by addressing a number of the supply-side constraints which have been negatively affecting our competitiveness’ (INTA Committee, 2008). While mistrust grew on the West African side as negotiations progressed, the Caribbean side endorsed the EPA while, as an observer suggested, ‘not a lot was surprising about the process’ (Bishop et al, 2012, p. 14).

While it seemed clear from the CRNM’s perspective that the EPAs would be beneficial, there was at the same time a large number of allegations that the key negotiating body was acting in ‘blind trust’. Guyana’s President Bharrat Jagdeo argued that the CRNM promoted ‘good faith negotiations’ (Stabroeknews, 2008). He insisted that ‘this region needs to operate from a careful assessment of its own interest, not to do things because other regions want to do it’ and that the region was ‘sleep walking once again into negotiation’ (Office of the President/Guyana, 2008). Sir Shridath Ramphal, a trade expert and the first head of the CRNM prior to the EPA process, similarly portrayed the CRNM’s willingness to sign the agreement as highly problematic, using the expression that ‘[w]histling in the dark is sometimes understandable, but signing in the dark is positively reckless’ (Stabroeknews, 2008). This clearly shows that some actors within the region thought that it was not necessarily a rational decision for the region to sign the EPA.

The internalisation of shared goals and approaches that is part of identification-based trust, secondly, made it easier to agree on the negotiating principles at stake, thereby easing the negotiating process. In the CARIFORUM case, both the EU and Caribbean officials had similar scenarios in mind when agreeing on the negotiation objective that the EPAs should serve as tools for development. CARIFORUM actors supported the EU’s proposal to include trade-related issues as drivers of development. This included the so-called ‘Singapore issues’ such as competition policy or trade facilitation and investment that were easily resolved in the negotiations, despite the controversy that surrounds them at the multilateral level. Bishop, Heron and Payne note that ‘[t]hese aspects of the EPA, which have been hugely controversial elsewhere, were negotiated quickly and comprehensively’ (Bishop et al, 2012, p. 16). The ECOWAS region, on the contrary, was suspicious that the EU’s trade policy oriented vision of the development dimension would primarily serve European commercial interests, and disagreed strongly with the EU’s interpretation of the development dimension in terms of trade policy reforms.¹¹

The different framing of the EPA negotiations in terms of a trade partnership, and the higher levels of identification-based trust that it gave rise to, thirdly, led to politicisation and delays being less frequent – except for the case of Guyana, which agreed to sign the EPA only reluctantly. The

empirical analysis shows that the negotiations proceeded much more smoothly and with less contestation compared to the West African case. It was for instance reported that the CRNM negotiators were regularly dining with their European counterparts during the negotiation rounds, and developed strong loyalties towards the EC side. Henry Gill, another former Director General of the CRNM, acknowledged that '[t]he hardest part of the negotiations, incidentally, was the co-ordination among us as CARIFORUM rather than our interface with the Europeans across the negotiating table' (FIRST Magazine, 2008, p. 14). Bishop, Heron and Payne similarly note that '[t]here is little doubt that the Caribbean negotiators enjoyed a familiar and friendly working relationship with their EU counterparts' (Bishop et al, 2012, p. 19).

For the Caribbean side, this was partly a way to establish respect (ibid) and a basis for mutual identification, and facilitated the interaction with the arguably mercantilist-minded negotiators from the European Commission. Identification-based trust and the convergence of thinking between the CRNM negotiators and the EU limited the influence of civil society actors in the negotiations, which are often agents of politicisation. At times, allegiances between the Caribbean key negotiators and the EU negotiators were stronger than those with regional civil society actors. During a stakeholder meeting on the EPAs in Barbados in 2008 that was part of the region's information dissemination programme, the CRNM negotiators tried to undermine critical voices from civil society representatives and informed the complete EC negotiation team in advance about potential critical comments from the Caribbean nationals, as I was told by a participant of that stakeholder meeting. Critics suggest that the strong feeling of closeness and identification with the European side may have inclined the CARIFORUM negotiators at times to side with the EU rather than with their own constituencies, which arguably reduced politicisation in bilateral relations (see also Bishop et al, 2012, p. 19).

Counterfactual evidence underlines how the lack of identification-based trust could have jeopardised the negotiation process. The literature on the negotiation theory indicates that a lack of trust easily leads to 'escalating polarization [that] is poignantly played out [...] where confusion, misunderstanding, and ultimately, hostilities grow until the collaboration has been transformed to blocked communication that puts the venture itself at risk' (Wu and Laws, 2008, p. 333). The delay of the EPA negotiations in the other ACP regions, in which mistrust and complaints about the EU's ingenuity as well as the general degree of politicisation have been much higher, can be seen as a counter example of what could have happened if identification-based trust and a relatively cooperative negotiation climate had not existed in the CARIFORUM case.

A constructivist understanding of trust in this way highlights how the key negotiating team's framing of the identity relationship with the EU as trade partners contributed to a de-politicisation of the relationship between the Caribbean region and its European counterpart, thereby facilitating the emergence of identification-based trust. A rationalist conception of trust as 'strategic trust' cannot fully capture how it became possible that negotiations proceeded without major delays and in a mutually satisfactory way, thereby enabling both sides to get to the final stage of signing the EPA agreement.

Conclusion

Research on international cooperation has long been an important part of the research agenda in International Relations. Yet, how trust contributes to such cooperation processes has received scant attention. If trust has been studied within the discipline, it has mostly been used as a proxy for a risk-taking attitude. Such an understanding of 'strategic trust', however, limits trust to a focus on cognitive assessments of information about the other side's expected behaviour and neglects the inherently

relational and affective determinants of trust. Whether or not state actors decide to trust or mistrust their counterpart also depends very much on the way in which they conceive the nature of the relationship between them, as research from other disciplines of the social sciences has long indicated. Social constructivist approaches seem particularly suitable for integrating the so far neglected affective and emotional dimension of trust into International Relations, which is complementary to the concepts of strategic and generalised trust.

This paper has endeavoured to enrich the understanding of international cooperation within International Relations by introducing the constructivist-informed concept of relational trust. Understanding trust as an inter-subjective variable implies that we need to pay attention to the actors' particular identity conceptions to understand why and when trust is present (or absent) in a particular relationship, and how it affects cooperation processes. It requires us to base the empirical analysis on an examination of the identity conceptions that state actors take on at the negotiating table. Trust and identities are mutually constitutive in the sense that interaction, and the concepts of self and other that it gives rise to, define the parameters of trustworthy behaviour. The paper presented two particular lenses on relational trust: benevolence-based trust, which increases a cooperative attitude because it makes actors more willing to engage in risk-taking behaviour in situations of uncertainty; and identification-based trust that eases the cooperation process by increasing the likelihood of arriving at mutual goals and negotiating principles.

The main empirical argument was that mistrusting the EU reinforced the West African side's reluctance to cooperate in the EPA negotiations, while identification-based trust strengthened the Caribbean region's readiness to conclude the agreement despite remaining uncertainties about its impact. The different levels of trust in the EU stemmed from the divergent conceptions of the relationship that the West African and the Caribbean region relied upon, and cannot be reduced to an 'objective' risk-assessment of the EU's trustworthiness. Instead, historical memory, identification and the perceived fairness of the negotiation procedures affected perceptions of the EU's trustworthiness in the EPA negotiations. The West African ECOWAS relied primarily on the colonial past as a frame of reference, which reinforced the apprehension that the EU was not genuinely interested in promoting development in the region. Perceptions of being treated disrespectfully and in a 'top-down' manner further reinforced mistrust in the negotiating partner. The Caribbean CARIFORUM region led by its key negotiating team, on the contrary, understood the relationship much more in terms of a trade partnership and was less inclined to refer to the colonial past. The proactive stance that the CRNM took in the EPA process reflected ideological convergence with the EU negotiators and was facilitated by its previous experience in international trade negotiations. The identification with the other side's role as equal trade negotiators created a sense of security that the EU was following shared goals and objectives. At the same time, the EU's bargaining stance was regarded as unavoidable in trade negotiations, and did not lead to feelings of resentment and mistrust.

These findings have shown the multiple ways in which trust or mistrust may shape negotiating behaviour in international politics. While rationalist approaches could rightly point out that strategic trust in the EU's benevolent motives was low, we need the concept of relational trust to understand why its 'tough' negotiating behaviour gave rise to very different reactions in the Caribbean and the West African cases. Different framings of the identity relationship facilitated variation in the level of identification with the EU, which in turn facilitated or complicated the negotiation process. It, moreover, helps us to put the outcomes of international trade negotiations in the context of the socially constructed proxies that actors rely upon when assessing the costs and benefits of trade liberalisation reforms that might be contested. Disregarding the process-related effects of relational trust paints a picture of international cooperation as a technical encounter between negotiating partners as 'rational calculators', which is not only devoid of the social dimensions of interaction, but fails to

fully capture the reasons that may prevent or encourage state actors to engage in cooperative behaviour.

Endnotes

¹ In particular, the different economic structures, geographical locations and histories of West Africa and the Caribbean region are likely to induce divergent identity conceptions when it comes to cooperation with the EU.

² Trust and confidence are distinct phenomena. Trust is inherently social, as we can only trust another actor, while confidence can be also directed at objectives (Luhmann, 1988).

³ For the sake of convenience, I will refer to 'relational trust' as 'trust' in the empirical parts of this paper.

⁴ Rathbun himself refers to such a constructivist understanding of trust as 'particularized trust', which is relational and dynamic in nature (Rathbun, 2012, p. 39).

⁵ Generalised trust, on the one hand, is located entirely at the level of individual state representatives. Rationalist approaches, on the other hand, reject the assertion that the motives of individuals affect the level of trust, which they see as a product of a given situation structure.

⁶ It must be noted that these terms are borrowed from the social psychological literature, even though they are used slightly differently because relational trust is understood to be a collective attribute rather than an individual trait. The social psychological literature moreover highlights perceived competence of the other as a driver of trust. Trust based on a belief in the competence of the trustee is determined by the perceived ability, competence, expertise and knowledge of the other. However, competence-based trust does not seem to qualify as a determinant of relational trust as it is closer to the notion of calculative trust, and therefore confidence.

⁷ It is important to note, however, that the trust-based conceptual framework developed in this paper does not offer a full-fledged theory of international cooperation.

⁸ It should be noted that perceived behavioural risks can be spread asymmetrically, just as the level of information can be distributed unevenly between the partners.

⁹ Note that in 2009 the CRNM has been renamed the Office for Trade Negotiations, and has been brought under the control of the CARICOM Secretariat, thereby presumably limiting some of its ability to act relatively autonomously.

¹⁰ For instance, then Prime Minister Owen Arthur (Barbados) and Trade Minister Chris Sinkler (Barbados) firmly endorsed the EPA; Prime Minister Kenny Anthony (St Lucia) and Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer (Antigua and Barbuda) were at first wavering, but then ultimately endorsed the EPA; President Bharrat Jagdeo (Guyana) was highly critical.

¹¹ Note that domestic trade ministries were more skeptical about signing the EPA but accepted the CRNM's position because, unlike many African states that are Least Developed Countries and can access the Everything But Arms trade regime with the EU, they lacked a feasible fall-back option.

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