

African Farmers on Trade and Agriculture

By Yves Niyiragira

(ACORD)—A Pan African delegation recently travelled to Berlin, Brussels, Madrid, Paris and London to engage European farmers, parliamentarians, civil society and media in discussions regarding the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) and the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) both instruments that risk having disastrous consequences on African small scale farmers.

Three farming leaders, two national parliamentarians and two ACORD staff constituted the African delegation that travelled across Europe between the 2nd and 14 March 2009. Dubbed the 'European Speaking Tour', the participants travelling from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Zambia, Ethiopia, Chad and Kenya all took time away from their work schedules to express to various European constituencies their strong concerns around the ongoing free trade negotiations (EPAs) between the European Union (EU) and African countries.

In 2007, under the pressure of a World Trade Organisation (WTO) deadline African countries were forced to hurriedly initial an interim EPA agreement. The Interim EPA requires that African countries open up to 80 per cent of their markets to European goods. Many African leaders have expressed the need to review several clauses within the agreement. Yet, the EU is now pushing for the speedy signing of these interim agreements as well as the Full/Comprehensive EPA that include services, investment and other issues yet to be agreed upon at WTO level.

The conditions outlined by the EPAs on protection measures are unduly constricting as compared to those recently negotiated at the WTO for developing countries. 'We refuse to endorse that which has not been tabled at the multilateral level of the WTO, being presented at bilateral level as are EPAs!' situates Hon. Catherine Kimura, Head of East African Legislative Assembly's Trade Committee, the legislative organ of the East African Community (EAC).

Threats to Food Security

While the current financial crises largely resulted from policy deficiencies and insufficient regulation of financial markets, similarly, the inadequate regulation of agricultural markets can be blamed for the 2008 global food crisis. Giving testimonies from their personal experiences, the African delegates expressed their concerns with the content and process of the EPA negotiations, which once signed threaten the livelihoods of 70 percent of Africa's population that relies on farming for their income. By exposing local markets to competition by super-production systems from Europe, import-export reversals, contraction of budgetary capacities of African states in favour of newly-formed regional blocs, the EPAs minimise the real chances for local and regional economic actors to resist the global crisis.

Fragmentation of Regional Blocs

Hon. Kimura highlights the tragic consequence of EPAs 'which threaten the ongoing regional integration processes'. She explains that 'regional integration is the key to development in Africa. By acting as a catalyst for increased cross-border trade and development of grassroots programs for investments, the existing regional blocs form the basis for sustained competition'. In the East and southern African region in particular, the EPAs have played a role in fragmenting the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) bloc. For example in the COMESA, five East African countries initialled together under the EAC, some initialled individually while the rest have not initialled at all.

Paying a Steep Price for Liberalisation

According to Hon. Kimura, EPAs shall lead to direct losses of revenue for the countries involved. Export and import taxes represent an important revenue source for government budgets in Africa, at times up to 50 per cent. Their decrease therefore reduces available expenditure for public and social service sectors including health, education and puts to peril the sustainability of expenditures within the public service and social sectors.

Threat to Agricultural Sector

In a region of the world where agriculture represents about 30 per cent of the GNP and 70 per cent of employment, the food crisis shed light on the dangers resulting from liberalisation of agricultural markets. Under the EPAs unregulated inequitable competition of local products with the EU products shall likely leave hundreds of thousands of farmers without an income.

Several agricultural sectors (including tomato, chicken, onion, milk products, cotton and others) have already suffered near collapse due to 'dumping' of cheap EU products. Hon. Kimura rejects the notion of addressing the real problem of agricultural subsidies by seeking open markets from African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. Yet, African countries are not in a position to subsidise their agricultural products as their European counterparts do.

Concentration of Production and Rural Migration

Liberalisation through competition puts pressure upon small scale producers and encourages towards large-scale agricultural ownerships and industries that stand to gain at the expense of small-scale growers common in rural areas. This creates the rural migration phenomenon, widespread in Africa, and characterised by young idle people from rural areas migrating towards towns and abroad. Kolyang Palebele from Chad describes this phenomenon as 'the existence of a vulnerable African rural peasantry'. Palebele, a leader in Chadian national farmers association expresses his fears on the risks that weigh upon food sovereignty in Africa by EPAs. 'There is a confusion in defining priorities', he explains, 'What Africa needs, is support from the EU in setting up national infrastructure that supports agriculture, organisation of sub-regional markets and financing systems adapted to the agriculture such as agricultural banking and agri-business schemes. Meanwhile, it would help to bring agricultural producers on board at all the stages of the processes.'

Lack of Information

What outrages Kolyang Palebe, as well as the other members of the delegation, is the lack of information available locally in the countries where they are present. Yabowerk Haile, Head of Programmes of ACORD in Ethiopia, recounts the efforts by organisations of the Civil Society to sensitize the local populations to the impacts of EPAs on development and food security. However, these have not informed the African governments signing of the agreements because of immense pressure from the North.

The delegation finalised its meetings around Europe on 14 March, during which the representatives met with national parliamentarians, members of government, representatives of agricultural networks and the Civil Society. Meanwhile, the African leaders continue to appeal for more contemplation upon EPAs and more readiness to genuinely listen to ACP countries and their concerns.

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