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No one has the right to use food as a weapon against the people

PUBLIC MEETING

African agricultural policies and the development of family farms

The agricultural policies implemented by the leaders of African countries during the last 50 years have promoted only cash crops. The cotton, cocoa, palm oil, rubber, groundnut and other sectors have been organised and resourced and the crops exported to feed the industries of the North with practically no value added. Unfortunately for the continent, the price of agricultural commodities is set by the West to the detriment of African producers, and this has been one of the main reasons behind the crises in these sectors, which have drained the continent's resources abroad, following the example of the mining industry. During this period, no substantial effort was made to support the production of subsistence crops until the recent riots against high prices.

Although governments have promoted cash crops, it is nevertheless true that it is the productivity of hundreds of thousands of family farms that has made Cote d'Ivoire, for example, the world's biggest cocoa producer and placed African cotton among the best in the world. Despite the difficulties they face and the lack of support, family farms have been largely responsible for ensuring food self-sufficiency on the continent. When climatic conditions are good, the Sahelian countries of Mali and Burkina Faso can easily produce grain surpluses. As data provided by the National Office for Food Security shows, Benin's 2007 tuber demand was completely satisfied by domestic production of more than 5,400,000 tonnes. In addition to its capacity to feed the people, family farming is the continent's biggest provider of employment. Family agriculture, which is the crucible of our culture, has been able to adapt to change, particularly climate change.

Moreover, despite their seeming fragility, small African peasant producers have a lot of knowledge about the continent's very rich agricultural biodiversity. When associated with appropriate agroecological techniques, approaches that draw on this knowledge produce highly satisfactory results. The use of organic fertiliser such as compost, for example, and anti-erosion techniques, have doubled and even quadrupled yields from local seeds. Integrated pest management without using pesticides has led to a 30% increase in production. Finally, in Mali, the Office du Niger rice producers won the prize for best yield, with more than eight tonnes per hectare, using only organic fertiliser and local seeds.

The support that would have sustained these performances has gradually been whittled away. Government support for agriculture has fallen by 62.5 per cent, from US\$8 billion in 1984 to US\$3 billion in 2006. On average, developing countries allocate 4% of their national budgets to agriculture, and several countries allocate only 1% or even less. These figures clearly show the growing disregard for agriculture. Agriculture, however, provides 60–80% of jobs, and accounts for 25–40% of the GDP of African countries. African farmers feed approximately 90% of the African population.

Unfortunately, a flawed analysis of recent food riots has led African leaders to discredit this form of agriculture and to introduce policies that promote industrial rather than family agriculture, despite the performance of family farming that we describe above.

The violent riots against the cost of living raised the awareness of the international community about agriculture's vital role in maintaining political stability and national security, and even international security. Several meetings were convened to discuss the situation both in Africa and elsewhere with a view to raising significant amounts of money. Some announcements have been made about funds, and several African countries are preparing a strategic plan to relaunch their agricultural sectors. These plans essentially aim to promote agribusiness by granting large areas of land to nationals and, especially, to foreign governments and transnational companies. Madagascar, for example, granted nearly 1,500,000 acres to the Korean company Daewoo. We would not be surprised to find that similar transactions are being conducted by our countries and that the land reform under way in most West African countries seeks nothing more than to legitimise similar situations and to leave the door open for the legalisation of the plunder of our land. These large areas are taken away from small producers and devoted to monoculture and the production of agrofuels and cash crops. In addition to the warnings about the risk of famine, we can expect real social crises.

Unfortunately, this production model, which already exists in Europe, is viable only thanks to massive government subsidies and the intensive use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, which accelerates environmental destruction. For example, the European Union and the United States provide as much as US\$350 billion per year in subsidies to their agricultural sector but provide only US\$50 billion in public aid to Africa. It is as if developing countries are being propped up only to be brought down. Given the scandals of mad cow disease and dioxine chicken, this agricultural model is increasingly called into question by Westerners, who are turning towards healthy foods produced through organic agriculture.the

Considering the limitations and disastrous consequences of this form of agriculture on health and the environment, we call on our leaders to be cautious and to promote family farming, which has shown that it can be successful and has demonstrated its productivity.

We also call on African peasants to resist and protect their agriculture, as they have always done.

We congratulate those African countries that have showed some trust in their farmers by granting them a prominent position and even putting them at the forefront in the preparation of laws on agriculture. Our colleagues from Senegal and Mali will speak about their experiences on this at a later stage. We will also hear from Benin farmers who are currently participating in the review of the country's strategic plan to relaunch the agricultural sector.

Cotonou, 23 April 2009