

Ndiogou Fall is President of the Executive Committee of ROPPA (Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs Agricoles de l'Afrique de l'Ouest/Network of Farmers and Peasant Organisations in West Africa – <http://www.roppa.info>), the main umbrella group for peasant farmers in West Africa. Here we provide a summary of a longer, unpublished interview about ROPPA and some of its political thinking.

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Tell us something about ROPPA

ROPPA was founded in 2000, but peasants in this region were already well organised. The great drought in the 1970s was a brutal awakening: it showed us that we needed far greater solidarity and that we could achieve this only by organising ourselves. This led to the establishment of national peasant associations, and it is these that are brought together in ROPPA.

So why was it decided to create ROPPA?

For two reasons. First, the regional integration process, which included agriculture, was gaining momentum and international negotiations were occurring. We favour regional integration, but of a kind that protects our interests. So we realised that we had to come together in a regional body that would act as a kind of interface. Second, we realised that all the peasant organisations in the region had the same objectives and the same concerns, and that we would benefit from exchanging experiences and increasing solidarity.

What are ROPPA's objectives?

The first is to defend small family farmers. West African agriculture is essentially rooted in small family farms. The families work on the land first to feed themselves and then to sell their produce. This kind of farming is considered archaic by some, but this is what we have. It provides employment and food and reduces dependency. The second is to defend our interests in regional and international negotiations. More and more decisions are being taken in Abuja [Nigeria] in the case of ECOWAS, Ouagadougou [Burkina Faso] in the case of WAEMU, and in Geneva [Switzerland] in the case of the WTO.* These negotiations are leading to more and more trade liberalisation. We must defend our interests in these talks, as no one else will do it for us.

At the organisational level our objective is to support peasant organisations in each country to ensure that they have the capacity to formulate proposals and

to mobilise. Another objective is to form alliances. In agriculture there are big farmers, manufacturers and retailers. We need to talk to them. Of course, we have our own political thinking but we need to talk directly with these other sectors. It is the same at the international level, where we are very open to developing alliances with other organisations. We do all this but we are also careful to retain our autonomy, with our own reflections and our own actions.

How important are peasant seeds to ROPPA?

Very important. We are aware of the increasing concentration of the seed industry in transnational corporations. This is very dangerous, because having our own seeds is important for the autonomy of our farmers. ROPPA is trying to mobilise on a regional level around this issue. ECOWAS is drawing up regional legislation on genetic resources and we lobbied strongly in defence of our interests at its ministerial meeting on the management of genetic resources. We are also involved in the development of an inventory of potentially useful genetic resources, although we're not taking the lead here. It is only really at the political lobbying level that we have the capacity to do very much. We're finding it difficult to get going on other initiatives, such as seed banks. We know that the transnationals are advancing very quickly at the regional level, and yet we have very few concrete plans on how to stop this.

Can you imagine ROPPA organising an information campaign on this subject?

We have an important campaign called "Afrique Nourricière" [Africa can feed itself] which shows that Africa, and in particular West Africa, is able to feed itself with its current natural and farmer resources. This is an educational campaign which also describes the threats to our natural resources and questions why these resources are not being used to develop Africa. This is a voluntary initiative at country level in which social groups ask ROPPA for technical assistance. For example, a group of women may ask for help in organising



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- B Benny Haerlin
- C Carlos Correa
- D David Quist
- E Johnson Kpere
- F Francisca Rodriguez
- G German Velez
- H Hope Shand

demonstrations around food issues as part of a campaign to generate public discussion with governments. Another example is our campaign to find volunteers to feed their families only on African food for one week. We bring them together to talk about the problems they encounter in doing this, such as not being able to find an African food item that their family wanted. We invite politicians, researchers and farmers to discuss how they can help households to eat African food.

What does ROPPA feel about the upcoming EU-ACP agreement? [see box]

ROPPA is well known for being radically against the agreement, and is fighting tooth and nail to ensure that these agreements do not get approved. We have good reasons for taking this position. These agreements will be a catastrophe. I think the EU knows this very well. We really don't know why the EU persists with these negotiations, because it doesn't gain anything commercially and risks losing a great deal of credibility. We are not against agreements, but they must be based on development; this has always been the intention – to work together for development and to fight poverty. This was what sustained Europe's credibility for years. But ever since negotiations have really got started, they've replaced "development" and "fighting poverty" with the economy. Everything that is now being negotiated is to enhance trade.

The EU is imposing "democracy" on us, but Europe needs to be democratic too. Important

legislation is being adopted without either the elected members of parliament or the people being involved. It's just a few civil servants who come and decide in Europe's interests. This is a problem. It is discrediting democracy. Europe can't make announcements like this [about democracy] and then, behind the scenes, develop [decision-making] systems that go completely against this.

What does ROPPA think about Nyéléni as a process for farmers and what does ROPPA hope for after Nyéléni?

We are very much involved in organising the conference as it is taking place in a part of Africa where we are very active and well known. What can it do for the sub-region? Through exchanging information, people in the region will realise that the situation we face is not peculiar to Africa, and that we should form international alliances with those who are victims of the same system. In addition, the authorities in our area will realise that this is an international debate. This will help our social movements. After Nyéléni, we will hope to be more effective in the fight against trade liberalisation.



* ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

WAEMU: West African Economic and Monetary Union

WTO: World Trade Organisation

EU-ACP Economic Partnership Agreements

In 2000, the European Union (EU) and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), which are all former colonies, adopted the Cotonou Agreement, which is a framework trade, aid and political co-operation treaty. It replaced the previous Lomé Convention and provides for a general set of privileged relations between the EU and the ACP countries in matters of market access, technical assistance and other issues. The objective is to facilitate the economic and political integration of the ACP countries into a liberalised world market over the next 20 years.

Under the Cotonou Agreement, the parties agreed to negotiate a separate set of individual bilateral treaties between the EU and the participating ACP countries. Those individual arrangements will provide specific rights and obligations tailored to each ACP region (West Africa, Eastern and Southern Africa, and so on). They are called "Economic Partnership Agreements" (EPAs). While there are 78 ACP countries, only 76 will be subjected to EPAs. (South Africa and Cuba have, or will have, separate arrangements with the EU.)

The first and very general phase of the EPA negotiations ran from September 2002 to September 2003. In October 2003, the second phase started. By October 2008, all negotiations should be completed and the EPAs should be in force.

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