

abc Burkina n° 183

The ROPPA (West African Farmer Organisations' and Agricultural Producers' Network) is out to save the Agricultural Policy of the ECOWAS. It proposes :

- 1. The introduction of a 50% band for food products within the Common External Tariff(CET)**
- 2. The negotiation of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) that respects West African food sovereignty**

On April 5 this year, in connection with its 4th ordinary congress (See also *abc* Burkina n° 182), the ROPPA (West African Farmer Organisations' and Agricultural Producers' Network) published and interesting document:

ROPPA proposals for the implementation and defence of ECOWAS Agricultural Policy (= ECOWAP).

The document has been submitted to the bodies concerned within the ECOWAS and the WAEMOU. It deserves to be widely circulated. It represents the official standpoint of farmer organisations within the WAEMOU (+ Ghana and Sierra Leone, also represented at the congress). With its realistic proposals and the quality of its argumentation, it ought to bring valuable food for thought to the ongoing negotiations in the talks between the European Union and West Africa on the Economic Partnership Agreements. Here are some excerpts from the most significant statements.

Introduction

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The achievement of food sovereignty depends, of necessity, on the prior success of regional integration. Therefore the CET (the Common External Tariff which determines customs duties) should act as an adequate and efficient incentive to guarantee the protection of food products and to ensure community preference, which is the basis of regional integration. On these grounds, the transposition of the WAEMOU external tariff to all countries in the ECOWAS ought to be thoroughly adjusted in order ensure that the objectives of ECOWAP can be attained.

At the same time it is important to make sure that the ECOWAS is in a position to reach the targets of its agricultural policy. By 2008 it is due to set up a free trade area with the EU, opening its internal market to European products under the terms of WTO agreements, Article XXIV of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in particular (Free trade areas). However, whilst it is clear that EPAs

can not break away from WTO rules, they should in no way impose more stringent or less favourable conditions on the contracting parties. Therefore the many provisions on market access for developing countries (DCs) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) must also be taken into account.

Manifestly West Africa now stands at a watershed of its economic and social history in the negotiations within ECOWAS on genuine regional integration and in the talks with the EU on a free trade area. The outcome of these negotiations will have direct or indirect implications for all groups of the population in the sub-region, and in particular for those who make up the majority. Given the structure of the economies in the sub-region, it will be the farmers – in the widest sense of the term – who will bear the brunt of the price to pay for economic integration with European farm and food products.

Subsistence farmers and small-scale agricultural producers will be front line targets, when the ECOWAP enters into force. Within the ROPPA network they have therefore made an analysis of the assets at stake and the opportunities open to ECOWAS for adapting the regional integration instruments to better suit the objectives of their agricultural policy.

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These proposals should be considered as a set of arguments that ROPPA makes available to ECOWAS and WAEMOU governments in charge of bringing about successful regional integration and negotiating agreements that will sustain agriculture and West African farms.

Therefore, having reviewed the situation of food production and regional integration, we put forward our proposals for better safeguards of West African agriculture by means of a fifth tariff band of the CET within the ECOWAS and for a partial opening up of markets through the EPAs.

Background and present scenario

The ECOWAP is under an obligation to quickly set up economic instruments, such as the CET in 2006, and to face the challenge of trade negotiations with the EU (EPAs) and the WTO. The time factor is decisive for the success of the project. It has taken Europe over 30 years of vigorous import restrictions and robust subsidies to arrive at its present productivity level and competitive edge, self-sufficiency in food supply and economic integration.

Furthermore, in spite of 11 years of application of the Agreement on Agriculture, in terms of which customs duties have been reduced by 36% as compared to the base period 1986-1988, EU import rates are still infinitely higher than those of the WAEMOU and ECOWAS areas:

51-75% for wheat (compared to W. Africa's 5%)

47% for rice (compared to W. Africa's 10%)

65% for beef (compared to W. Africa's 20%)

75% for milk powder (compared to W. Africa's 5%)

90% for sugar (compared to W. Africa's 20%)

In addition the ECOWAS' capacity for subsidising farmers, in compensation for the low price levels

generated by reduced import duties, is virtually non existent.

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2. Measures to ensure food sovereignty

2.1 Introduction of a 50% tariff band for food stuffs

2.2 A rule on partial access to regional markets in the Economic Partnership Agreement

(abc Burkina, Editor's comment: The document sets out the arguments in favour of negotiating an Economic Partnership Agreement which is in compliance with WTO rules and respects food sovereignty)

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The large number of LDCs in West Africa justifies defending proposals in favour of asymmetric market access in the EPA framework, i.e. 100% opening of EU markets and 50% opening of West African markets.

Conclusion

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For these reasons, the ECOWAS has no other choice but altering its CET by introducing a fifth tariff band taxing foreign products at 50%.

Simultaneously it will be necessary to negotiate an asymmetric liberalisation process with the EU, to make allowance for tougher protection of some agricultural products, foodstuffs or not, according to their recognised strategic importance. All products involved in the regional food sovereignty are to be included as well as certain non-foodstuffs, such as cotton and textile products, in order to provide for locally added value, instead of exporting at very low or fluctuating world market prices.

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EPAs should not be stricter than the rules of the WTO.”

.../... (End of excerpts).

For readers who wish to see the text in full (14 pages), please go to: Proposition ROPPA

abcBurkina,Editor's comment: The document is an important milestone in the EPA process. It takes a realistic approach. No West African State is prepared to refuse an Economic Partnership Agreement with the EU. The ROPPA statement presents a proposal – compliant with WTO rules - which ought to pave the way for safeguarding food sovereignty and, in extension, uphold sufficient protection of

key sectors of the economy of ECOWAS. Nevertheless, the conclusion of such an EPA cannot be taken for granted. In order to succeed it will certainly be necessary to put pressure on ECOWAS agriculture and trade ministers. Therefore farmers organisations must hasten to set up alliances with other sectors of the civil society (trade unions, consumer associations, etc.). These proposals deserve to be debated in the parliaments of ECOWAS. Furthermore it is important to try and mobilise the civil society in Nigeria.

Maurice Oudet
Koudougou, 26 April, 2006

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