

*Interview with Renwick Rose, coordinator, Winfa (original version)*

***Grain de sel: EPAs are very much debated amongst farmers in developing countries. Could you tell us what is at stake for your region in particular and why?***

Renwick Rose: The Caribbean is an area with sensitive export crops: sugar, rice and bananas being the principal ones.

We have mainly small farmers, many of them on land of about 1 hectare and often not having legal title to the land. There is a significant female presence in agriculture, mainly for food crops. (About 30 percent of WINFA's members are women, many of them heads of single-parent households).

There has been a steady decline in agricultural production, including food production for local markets. Meantime food imports from the USA and Europe continue to climb steeply, passing the \$2 billion mark. Only two Caribbean countries have a surplus of agricultural exports over imports-Guyana and Belize.

There are various levels of integration in the region in concentric rings. There is the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), representing the small island-states in the Eastern Caribbean with a common currency, single judicial system etc. Some of these islands are really tiny with populations of 50,000-60,000 people. The OECS countries are themselves part of the wider CARICOM bloc with the larger English-speaking states, Suriname and Haiti. CARICOM has a special trading agreement with the Dominica Republic and they negotiate collectively with the European Union as CARIFORUM.

***GDS: What are WINFA's main expectations towards EPAs? (risks and opportunities).***

RR: Even before the EPAs, there has been significant preference erosion which badly affected our exports of these three products from the mid-90s up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus in bananas, the Windwards Island exported over 290,000 tonnes in 1992 with some 25,000 farmers involved. Today production has fallen to about 70,000 tonnes with less than 5000 farmers still in production. The question is: what can the EPA do to stop this decline? There is also the issue of developing the regional market. We need financing. The EPA is supposed to be a tool to cement regional integration and to foster development but it must address the interests of the farming population, recognizing their specificities.

Delegates from the EU speak about modernizing agriculture but they also talk in terms of large-scale agriculture. We sell fair trade bananas to the big supermarkets but our producers do so from small units. But what if these units are too small to be economically viable? One solution would be to encourage the information of strong farmers co-operatives, working collectively.

Food security in the region will also be at risk from hasty tariff liberalization, allowing for a flood of cheap food imports. Our experience in this regard has not been encouraging.

It seems as though some of our negotiators have wheels on their feet. The problem is that there is a lack of information on the negotiation process. The negotiators do not appear to take the task of providing information seriously enough. For instance there were negotiating sessions in St. Lucia and Barbados but nothing in the media. It was only because WINFA and other NGOs mobilized farmers to march and hold rallies that they invited us for face-to-face discussion.

There are also people in our own governments who do not appear to understand the need for civil society participation. They accuse us of being influenced by European NGOs who they say are against the EPAs because the NGOs want to protect European markets. This is certainly not the case. We are not against the EPAs in themselves; we are FOR the inclusion of pro-people policies in the EPAs. One problem with the Caribbean is our vulnerability. In World Bank terms we are classified as middle-income countries but given our small size, physical location in the hurricane belt, open economies, we are in many respects even more vulnerable than some low-income countries. We rely heavily on agriculture and tourism but one hurricane can destroy the entire region, ruin the whole regional economy. Our dependence on a few agriculture export commodities leave us susceptible to disaster, thus if the bananas price collapse we will have a catastrophe.

If you look behind the “middle-income” classification you will realize that at the same time our islands have poverty levels in the range of 30 per cent. Most EPAs don’t take account of such human factors. In terms of the participation of civil society, the farmers organizations in the Caribbean (WINFA) and four African regions themselves did a mid-term evaluation with the support of IFAD. Our major concerns are about participation, the time deadline, the development dimension, building productive capacity, ensuring food security and dealing with climate change.

Regional integration and ACP solidarity are other issues. During Lome, the ACP negotiated as a bloc. That is no longer so. Now ACP countries and regions can be pitted against each other. The European Commission encourages this and there is every indication that allocations for the 10<sup>th</sup> EDF would be used to induce countries to liberalize heavily and rapidly. With some countries going into elections it is tempting to dance the EC’s tune in order to gain EDF benefits.

***GDS: What would happen if the EPAs were not signed? According to you, do alternatives exist? What are they?***

RR: We (farmers organizations) are observes and that is all. Caribbean governments have committed themselves to signing, whether people agree or not. There are promises of development assistance but I think we do not seem to learn from history. For instance, concerning the EDF many promises are still unfulfilled. In the Caribbean we joke about

EDF meaning “Everything Delayed Forever”. Let me give you our experience. More than 85% of the entire banana trade from the Windward Island is now Fair Trade. We were seeking EU assistance in the mid-nineties to enable us to engage in Fair Trade but it was only with the help of two European NGOs that we finally got some assistance from Brussels in 1997. Fair Trade exports began in 2000. Since 2002 we had been trying to secure EDF funding for an environmental project to enable farmers to meet Fair Trade criteria. It was only last year that we got approval for a small project of 500,000 euros. While one waits exchange rates change, the Delegation changes personnel causing more delays. We are concerned about these problems which affect timely development assistance.

But for five years our governments have not explained alternative scenarios so they will have little choice but to sign up to the EPA. We put all our eggs in one basket and the GSP raised by the EC and alternative is not favourable. The EU desperately wants the Caribbean to sign so as to put pressure on African and the Pacific to come on board.

**By Renwick Rose**