

Interview with Ishmael D. Sunga.

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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?

Ishmael Sunga: A key issue we are grappling with is the lack of knowledge and information that the majority of farmers have on EPAs. This has limited their participation in the debate and the negotiations, with the consequent result that their concerns are likely not to be taken on board. Indeed, there has been a glaring absence of farmers' involvement particularly at the national and regional levels. Whilst SACAU is currently preparing the input of farmers in the negotiation process with the support of IFAD, the challenge is to be able to mobilise farmers to make meaningful inputs within the short period remaining before the negotiations are expected to be concluded.

The problem is compounded by the absence of impact studies specifically on agriculture that would provide credible information on which to base farmers arguments in the negotiation process. Studies undertaken are general in nature. Moreover, they are generally not accessible to the general public, whilst the credibility of some of them has been questioned in view of the fact that the EU itself undertook them.

GDS: What are SACAU's main expectations towards EPAs?

IS: We recognise and appreciate the importance of trade, but there are key issues that need to be addressed before trade. One of the main issues relates to the ability of the majority of farmers to take advantage of the opportunities the trade liberalisation may bring, as well as their capacity to manage the risks that will come with competition. In this regard, we expect an EPA that is more developmental in orientation, seeking to first address the supply side constraints or farmers before full liberalisation is achieved. Thus, we would expect full liberalisation to be implemented after 20 years or so, and that the principle of reciprocity would be gradually introduced.

We also expect an EPA that recognises the plurality of markets, giving attention not only to international trade, but also seeking to promote trade at country and SADC levels. With respect to financing mechanisms for the costs of adjustment and development dimension of EPAs, it is our expectation that EDF facilities should be complementary to a special fund that should be set up for this purpose.

As soon as the agreement is signed, whatever its content, a lot of work has to be done to monitor its implementation. There is therefore urgent need for farmers to develop a performance measurement framework for EPAs designed to track its implementation in order to generate data that would indicate whether agreed milestones are being achieved and the associated impact.

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

Our stating point is that EPAs will be concluded by the end of the year as scheduled. It appears from the pronouncement being made at various political levels that this would indeed be the case. Thus trying to stop EPAs or delay its conclusion may not be that useful. Instead, all efforts should be made to ensure that farmers concerns are incorporated in the final agreement, and that farmers have a better understanding of what the arrangements would be and the associated opportunities and risks.

However, it is clearly doubtful that all the issues will be resolved within the remaining time. It is therefore envisaged that the agreement that would be signed will provide for the conclusion of pending issues after its signature. Thus what could be concluded would be a framework agreement on certain issues.