Ibrahim Ouedraogo

GRAIN: What are the conditions like for small farmers in Africa and what are the main challenges that they face?

Ouédraogo: Most small farmers in Africa live in extreme poverty, where they face a constant struggle to survive. The challenge for them is to assure that their farms can provide food for their own families and, if possible, a surplus or a cash crop that they can sell in the markets to cover the costs of healthcare, school fees for their children, and so on. Faced with this situation, farmers seek to organise unions and associations that are strong enough to defend their interests. The farmers' unions organise technical training programmes, form co-operatives, develop markets for local produce, and set up village banks, which allow farmers to escape local usurers who often charge interests rates reaching 100%. But the life for the African farmer remains a daily struggle, complicated by drought and erratic rainfall. These small farmers are the focus of INADES-Formation's work. We try to help them make their voices heard and to help them find sustainable solutions to their problems.

Do you think GM crops can help resolve the problems that African farmers face?

African farmers have developed their own seeds that are adapted to their agricultural systems. They've developed water harvesting techniques, methods for enhancing soil fertility and pest management practices that are highly effective and that enable them to survive in unpredictable and precarious environments. There is a lot of publicity and money spent promoting genetically modified (GM) crops, but we must be cautious. The information we have from South Africa and India does not show significant yield increases, and there are many potential risks.

I think scientists here understand that there are many techniques already developed here that are more appropriate and important for African farmers, such as those dealing with soil fertility and water management. For example, if you go to the Sahelian (desert) parts of Burkina Faso, you'll see that farmers have developed water harvesting techniques that allow them to farm under conditions of drought – and produce enough vegetables to feed the markets in the cities. These are the kinds of techniques that need to be supported. With GM crops there are major economic risks. Small farmers could easily lose their autonomy.

Is the contamination of local seeds by GM crops a current concern?

Burkina Faso has already carried out field experiments with GM cotton and other countries will soon follow. But small farmers and the public have not been informed about the experiments, even though they put people at risk. In West Africa, cottonseed is used as food for humans and livestock, and cross-pollination is also a concern. There needs to be strong regulation and far greater transparency. The tests that are currently being carried out are not open to the public and, consequently, the results can always be manipulated to hide any failures and make it seem as if these crops are the solution for African agriculture.

Ibrahim Ouédraogo ...
is Secretary-General of INADES-Formation, which brings together the African Institute for Economic and Social Development and the African Training Centre. It is a pan-African association of national organisations with commonly held objectives, strategies and financial resources working primarily with rural communities in ten countries of West, Central and East Africa. Says Ouédraogo, *"INADES does not arrive in rural communities with a pre-determined programme. What interests us is supporting the visions that communities have for their own societies, and we offer them assistance, particularly for issues like food security, management of natural resources, rural credit, and agricultural markets and for the more vulnerable sectors of the population, notably women and youth".*

What is INADES doing to help inform people about GM crops?

We have helped to put in place a coalition for the promotion of Africa's genetic heritage (Coalition pour la promotion du génétique africaine) and the African Union has put forward two model laws dealing with biosafety and farmers' rights. I think by drawing attention to farmers' rights we can show that, over the long-term, GM crops and the push for patents will lead to the dispossession of the seeds that African farmers have developed over generations.

We're doing awareness building and training work. We've held meetings with elected officials and civil society to inform them of the risks of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). We're currently working on a strategy to bring the information to the village level, to small farmers, so that they can take positions and make their voices heard.

Buidling a stone 'diguette' (foreground) around the millet field is a common technique used by farmers in West Africa to combat soil erosion.

We're up against a strong lobby for GM crops, which speaks directly to the Heads of State and the Ministers of Agriculture. This is not an easy struggle, but we believe it is a just one, in that we are interested in preserving the heritage that we have, which has allowed Africa to live and produce for generations. It is unacceptable to put this at risk for GMOs that can have all kinds of negative consequences.

In June 2004 there was an event in Burkina Faso organised by US Agency for International Development to promote GM agriculture which brought together many heads of state and high-level officials from West Africa. Why is there this interest in bringing GM crops to West Africa?

Part of the problem is that the national agricultural research programmes are looking to outside sources of funding. The large biotech corporations are eager to support research into genetic engineering, and this has the effect of pushing national research in this direction. And there are also efforts to push African governments into supporting GM crops, like the meeting in Burkina Faso. The objective of the three-day meeting was to push the governments of the region towards accepting biotechnology and allowing GM crops to penetrate the African market.

We organised a parallel event to provide another perspective. We presented our position to all of the national delegations at the meeting and to the press, and we held a public event at the university that brought together over 1000 people, with many delegates from rural NGOs, farmers organisations and village associations from the interior of the country. I think our message was understood and we could see that the people were clearly not convinced of the benefits of GMOs. But there is still a lot of work to be done. Civil society groups in Burkina Faso have united behind a plan of action and advocacy to inform people about the issues through workshops and seminars and through the local media. The idea is to build a critical mass within the population that can put forward a responsible and knowledgeable position on GMOs.

Prior to the ministerial meeting, in April 2004, the NGOs ACCORD, INADES-Formation and GRAIN organised a workshop with elected officials in Burkina Faso to explain our concerns over GMOs and to point out the advantages there are for African countries to apply the model laws of the African Union. This was followed by a similar conference with civil society organisations and a press conference. Immediately after the conference, the US Embassy reacted, saying that they wanted me to meet with them to explain why we had taken a position contradicting the state's position on GMOs. They were concerned because the Ministerial conference was set to take place in a couple of months and they were concerned about anti-GMO elements mobilising around it.

Small farmers in Africa could easily lose their autonomy by accepting and adopting GM crops

It appears that USAID will be organising a follow-up conference to the Burkina Faso meeting, this time in Mali in 2005. Will groups in Mali make similar efforts to counter the GM propaganda coming out of that conference?

The coalition in Mali is even better prepared then was the coalition in Burkina for the upcoming conference. ACCORD, which is active in Mali, is an active member of the Coalition, has already organised workshops and conferences on GMOs. They've contacted party leaders and government officials with the Ministry of Agriculture.

The Coalition helped draft an open letter to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) signed by over 650 civil society organisations denouncing the FAO's pro-biotech stance in its 2004 annual report. Can you tell us what this report means from the standpoint of small farmers in Africa?

This letter was really a petition sent to the FAO in reaction to its report, which indirectly and overtly supported GM crops for developing countries. But there is no proof that these GM crops are suited to African conditions; there are no reliable results. And there are major risks: contamination of local crops, economic control over African agriculture by foreign firms, etc. We were disappointed by the report and, as Africans, we had to react. I think the letter was helpful. It showed clearly that there is an alternative perspective that is widely held and that the FAO must engage in greater dialogue before coming to any decision to support GM agriculture.

Is there any message you have for Seedling readers outside Africa?

We are doing what we can with the small political space that civil society now has to operate. We are standing up to these unilateral efforts to impose GM crops on our countries as the ultimate solution for African agriculture. Africans have to organise among themselves, but we also need to work in networks with international partners. There is a lot that we can learn from the experience in other countries. The forces we are up against have the means and the capacity to rapidly impose their agendas. To stand up to this we need international solidarity. The solidarity we had with the meeting in Burkina was very helpful and we hope that this will also be the case in Mali.