

**Nestor Mahinou is the executive secretary of Synergie Paysanne (Peasant Synergy), a peasant farmers' trade union in Benin.**



## NESTOR MAHINOU

**I**n the name of liberalism and globalisation, what we are seeing today is centralised control of all that we usually call “goods”, whether they are owned collectively or individually. The freedom to believe, to learn and to share with others is diminishing and we are losing the capacity to live without the multinationals. They control everything, including our food supply. At the heart of this control lies a set of property “rights”, patents and other registered trademarks.

### Property rights pound traditional practices

All this is the prerogative of those enterprises and companies that invest in new technology, which gives a pounding to our traditional practices, standards and customs. In fact, we have a right in our country to have healers with recipes and formulas to treat illnesses. Although healers have this knowledge, they do not hesitate to pass it on to their children, friends and relations. They may exchange it for goods or money, but in all cases there is a respect for hierarchy.

The same system operates for the peasant who selects his own varieties of seeds. He shares them with his neighbours and does not claim any rights of invention. The same is true of a craftsman who innovates when he makes a piece of furniture. They are the property of everybody, a common good.


However, when a company creates a hybrid variety that is more resistant, can be harvested earlier or

has a high yield, the farmer must pay to plant the hybrid and faces restrictions on its use. This is extremely harmful, because it curtails the farmer’s freedom, makes it impossible to innovate, and harms the local culture. It prevents users, consumers and peasants from doing what they want with the creative work done by other people.

The right to intellectual property is now the main source of profit in what we could call the economy of knowledge. We must fight such practices; consumers, producers and users must feel free to adopt or reject any new invention. What is involved is the right of farmers, healers and other users of public goods to choose what they do with collective goods.

### Maximising peasant strength

What we need is a peasant organisation that allows us to maximise our collective strength and enables us to have control over and access to agricultural biodiversity. We need to continue to develop agricultural systems that respect the environment and human health. If we accept a bad definition of the concept of rights, our legitimate right of access to natural resources will come to an end.

Companies must not be allowed to appropriate our rights through patents. It is therefore imperative to establish rules that protect indigenous wealth and knowledge. We must be able to codify these rules to ensure that farmers maintain their true rights, such as the freedom to keep and share seeds. 



**Farhad Mazhar is a leading member of Bangladesh’s Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agricultural Movement), which practises and promotes biodiversity-based ecological agriculture.**



## FARHAD MAZHAR

**A**ny discourse of “rights” presupposes an autonomous and egocentric subject. In contrast, Nayakrishi Andolon is concerned not with “persons” or fictitious subjects endowed with “rights”, who exist outside society or the community, but with “relations”. A social

formation, including its political structure, is composed of the totality of concrete relations – ecological, economic, cultural, political, and so on – upon which the community is organised. Given the present as it is, Nayakrishi explores the possibility of creating the conditions for joyful relations. Strategically, it would like to engage in