Dacian Ciolos: “European approach is compatible with the right to food” in Africa

World Food Security, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Reform and sustaining the “agriculture” budget in the European multiannual financial framework 2014-2020. Numerous are the challenges facing the Romanian European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Dacian Ciolos. In office since 2009, he leads on the “green” policies in Brussels. Starting from the CAP, a “beast” that eats close to 40% of the EU’s budget, Ciolos doesn’t fail to remind us - in an exclusive interview with Afronline.org (Italy), Addis Fortune (Ethiopia), Sud Quotidien (Senegal), Les Echos du Mali (Mali) and Le Républicain (Niger) and - that this remains “the only community policy of the EU”. Africa, a continent where both farmers and consumers see the CAP as a thorn in the eye, hopes that Europe will finally do something to guarantee equal access to food for all Africans and to control the financial speculation which threatens food security and undermines the fight against poverty.

The next multiannual financial framework of the European Union presented by the European Commission in last June foresees a reduction of the agriculture budget, going from 39.4 per cent to 36.2 per cent of the overall European budget. Do you consider this reduction a defeat for the Common Agricultural Policy?

Dacian Ciolos: The portion of the total European budget that is spent on agriculture is not the most significant aspect, especially as this varies depending on the evolution of the European budget as a whole. The reality is that the amount effectively available for agriculture remains constant. That’s the most important thing. The agricultural Policy is the only true community policy and remains the most important voice in the European budget.

This highlights the importance European society places not only on the support for food production, but also on the supply of non food stuffs by farmers, paying particular attention to environmental factors.

By 2050 we will need to feed nine billion people. In face of this challenge, everybody – including Europe – must guarantee the current levels of production, and look to increase them without damaging the ecosystem. This is a huge challenge which the European Commission took into account in its proposal for the multiannual financial framework 2014 – 2020. The extremely delicate situation that today the countries of the Horn of Africa, which has been hit by a severe draught, are facing reminds us once again that the challenge of food security is of fundamental importance in the 21st century.

The Common Agricultural Policy is often accused of having a negative impact on small farmers in Europe and in Africa. What can African agriculture expect to gain from the reform of the CAP post 2013, more specifically in regard to the subsidies that hinder the Economic partnership agreements (EPAs) between European Union and ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries?

Ciolos: The future of small farmers is one of the priorities of the CAP reform. On the one hand we are looking to facilitate access to direct support for small farmers, on the other encourage their
introduction to the market. Within the context of its development policies Europe is looking to encourage cooperation amongst small farmers.

To be clear: today the European approach is compatible with the right to food. The CAP responds to the specific expectations of European society towards its own agricultural sector, both in environmental terms and regarding the well-being of livestock, health security and rural development.

It isn’t stressed enough, but the CAP has changed a lot. Over the past few years Europe has made fundamental changes such as “decoupling” – that is abolishing the link between the subsidies to European farmers and levels of production – and for example re-opening dialogue on export refunds. Today subsidies on exported European agricultural products make up less than 0.5 per cent of the Common Agricultural Policy’s budget.

Despite the progress you have cited, African farmers and consumers continue to criticize the overly rigid phytosanitary rules placed on African Agricultural commodities that limits considerably the possibility of entering the European market, despite the reduction of customs duties. Furthermore CAP subsidies are often cited in Europe as a necessary measure to help save the environment. Don’t you think that in reality these constitute a form of "hidden" protectionism?

Ciolos: European norms are not rigid, they are strict. They are strict because that is what European consumers want. I’d like to highlight that these health standards apply to all products, imported or not. Europe is intransigent on such issues. At stake is the respect for and protection of its consumers.

It’s not about protecting European farmers. Nevertheless, despite these norms Europe remains the biggest global importer of goods from developing countries. This demonstrates that our rules in no way represent a form of “hidden” protectionism. As for European agricultural support, I repeat, this corresponds to the expectations our citizens have regarding agriculture. Producing food isn’t just a simple technical and economical operation.

It's a social, environmental and cultural process. In Europe we are very attached not only to agricultural production but also to promoting sustainable production and protecting our agriculture across all our territories. These needs translate into rules for the environment and livestock that are, however, not applied to non-European producers, such as African producers.

Considering that agricultural is the basis of economies like Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Niger, Mali and Senegal, some experts say that sustainable economic development and poverty reduction could only be realized with accelerated agricultural development. Yet, public investment in the sector remains very low. What does the new EU Agricultural reform do to support agricultural investment in low income African countries?

Ciolos: The CAP reform, which is currently in preparation, does not look at foreign investment; this is the domain of development policy. The CAP deals with European agriculture, with the aim of preserving the European agricultural model and responding to the concerns European citizens have about agriculture. The agricultural policies of one country mustn’t be in competition with the development of agriculture in another.

I work with my colleague Andris Piebalgs on development issues with the aim of encouraging agricultural investment in African countries. It’s vital to put agriculture in the centre of our development policies. The world of agriculture has been put aside for too long. Having said that, it
isn’t Europe’s task to create the dynamics and offer a model to imitate. There is no such thing as a single model in agriculture. Europe is however ready to support initiatives that help assert the African agricultural model.

We are also ready to support cooperation between farmers, the structuring of local markets and the development of regional agricultural policies. These are three key elements that help develop local agricultural resources based on regional and local dynamics. Moreover, since taking office as Commissioner for Agriculture, I have been committed to talking regularly with my African Union counterpart, Rhoda Peace Tumusiime. Things are moving ahead.

**What can the EU and G20 countries do to challenge the traders that speculate on agricultural commodities?**

**Cioloş:** Financial markets require an efficient and coordinated international response. This is why the G20 is so important. Price volatility puts great pressure on farmers and consumers across the globe. Today, we must create conditions in which global food production can be increased. This is why it is important to create strong agricultural policies, not just in Europe and the USA, and to establish agricultural policies that respect the development of other agricultures. It is just as important to double our efforts in research and development, increase transparency in agricultural markets, improve the efficiency of our international coordination work and better control financial markets.

**What conclusions do you draw from the last G20 meeting of the Ministers of Agriculture?**

**Cioloş:** In Paris we got a real dynamic going. We made huge steps forward regarding transparency thanks to the agreement on adopting the AMIS system of information on agricultural markets. Europe will be contributing substantially to this effort of transparency by publishing, in October 2011, its short term predictions for many of the main agricultural products. Furthermore we will be improving our modeling and harvest prediction instruments and verifying in what way this system could be extended to other countries. Of course more must be done. Agriculture has made a comeback to the top of the world’s list of priorities, now it must stay there.

**Land grabbing in the developing world is another hot topic. Does this trend worry you?**

**Cioloş:** It is possible that large scale land investment in developing countries can at times contribute to greater productivity and efficiency of the agricultural sector and a reduction in poverty. However, it can also have negative impacts on local livelihoods, political stability, food security, equity and social cohesion, good governance and environmental sustainability.

One thing is for sure: the CAP doesn’t encourage land deals, neither directly nor indirectly. In Europe every State has its own land policy. In fact, at a global level, there is nothing that forbids any country to have one.

Africa has a policy guideline on land management, which was adopted by the African Union in July 2009. From the beginning the European Union supported this initiative. We must ensure consistency between land tenure, but for these initiatives to succeed it is also necessary to establish a consultation process that defines the responsibilities of all actors involved. We need to work on this front under the aegis of FAO.

**Last May the Belgian Senate adopted a draft resolution on land grabbing in developing countries. The protagonist of this draft resolution is the senator Olga Zrihen, according to whom ”a draft law could emerge that binds Belgian development aid to ensuring that governments of the beneficiaries countries create a legal framework for the sales of arable**
land”. Do you consider the Belgian model one that could be followed by the Union as a whole?

Ciolos: I’m not here to comment on the national decision of a European Union member state or any other. Each and every European Member State has the right to make proposals and take initiatives.

Interview coordinated by Joshua Massarenti (Afronline.org), in collaboration with Addis Fortune (Ethiopia), Sud Quotidien (Senegal), Les Echos du Mali (Mali) and Le Républicain (Niger).