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# Listen to farmers: an interview with Ibrahima Coulibaly, President of CNOP-Mali.

In conversation with **Patrick Mulvany** in September 2017, in the Nyéléni Centre, Mali, Ibrahima Coulibaly discusses the crucial role of smaller-scale farmers in agricultural research.

## **Why is agricultural research important?**

Agricultural research is important. It was so in the past, it is today, and it can be tomorrow, but under one condition: Research always has to come from a need; specifically a need from the farmer<sup>1</sup>.

Agricultural research that stems from artificial needs or is imagined by researchers will always miss the real needs of farmers. The real question should be "can we have research that is useful?" Yes we can, and that is agricultural research that works for the needs of farmers.

## **How would a useful agricultural research agenda be developed?**

To develop the agenda, it is important to have mechanisms for inclusive participation of researchers, farmers, and governments (via policies). They all need to talk to each other, and most importantly, they need to understand each other. How the problems faced by farmers are taken up by researchers, and how the results are then shared back to farmers, and government, ensuring that the greatest number possible of farmers can have access to that knowledge; in that lies the question.

## **And what is the role of the researcher?**

The role of the researcher is first and

foremost to listen, particularly to the needs of farmers. And to do research and produce results based on these farmers' needs. It is worthless to do lots of research that will then sit in drawers of research institutions. Results that are not immediately transposable to smallholder farmers are not useful to them.

## **Should smaller-scale farmers be setting priorities for the research agenda?**

Exactly! Participatory approaches have been tested across the world where smaller-scale farmers have gathered and defined what their research needs are. Today more than ever, when we talk a lot about agroecology, it is becoming a necessity because nowadays there are real needs for research. For example: protection of cultures. There are lots of basic needs that have yet to be met. There is also a lot of local knowledge that needs to be tested by research, e.g. fertilisers – there are so many options that have yet to be formally researched, such as Foliar Fertilisers. They get minimal research in today's agenda. There is so much scope to diversify research, but it isn't tapped into. And smaller-scale farmers don't have the time to do the research. They can't be both farmers and [formal] researchers. Research can have

its role in agroecology but only if the agenda is set by farmers.

## **You said that farmers have the knowledge about seeds and soils, fertility, about agroecology. What stops the researcher from taking that knowledge and stealing that knowledge?**

This is a difficult question. The knowledge that smaller-scale farmers share is with an understanding that it should not be privatised. Knowledge is a common good. The risk that researchers use that knowledge for their own gain is always there. It is important to find solutions to avoid going down that path. I was just talking with my colleagues from Togo, who have an agroecological farm, and we said: We smaller-scale farmers need to document/record our experiences – this way, no one can steal them, because there would be a farmers' publication that shows the source of the knowledge.

## **Do you think that researchers understand 'Farmers' Rights' – or 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent' under the Biodiversity Convention? Do they understand their legal obligation to protect the knowledge and ensure the knowledge is not stolen?**

I don't think researchers understand this,

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at least currently. Only a few are sensitive to these questions and concerns. There is a need to educate researchers and explain that the world has changed, and that they too have to change with it. If they don't, they'll become dinosaurs, and disappear. If they are not able to transition towards working with smaller-scale farmers today, farmers will have to live without researchers.

**La Via Campesina and others have said very critical things about the international agricultural research programmes promoted by the CGIAR and similar organisations, and about corporate-led agricultural research, which dominates the North and Africa. What are your views on that?**

Those who claim that they work for farmers but are actually just promoting chemical agriculture and the interest of multinationals who only work on conventional agriculture are not worth it. If researchers don't understand that, they won't have a future. Researchers need to go beyond those multinationals' needs and think about the planet. Environmental degradation, human health impacts, etc.. They need to work for these issues, not for multinationals.

**But multinationals have commercial interests for their profits and they are encouraged by governments in the North; they are pushing GMOs in Africa. The programmes of AGRA and many other institutions across Africa are forcing this chemical-dependent genetically-modified agriculture on the smaller-scale farmers. What actions should Via Campesina, ROPPA, and other social movements take, or are taking, to try and stop this type of research?**

Here in Mali, we have done a great 'mobilisation' to stop GMOs from entering the country. It has been one of the most important mobilisations ever organised in West Africa. It is thanks to this that GMOs haven't made it to Mali. This shows that it is possible to stop them. We don't want GMOs to come and disrupt local farming production and our traditional farming systems. Researchers have to understand that GMOs aren't the answer. Following the corporate agendas isn't the solution. They may be promoted by big

research councils, by funding bodies, multinationals, powerful countries, but, in the end, GMOs have no place in smaller-scale farming and don't answer the needs of farmers. We don't want it, not now, not ever, in our fields.

**In Nyéléni 2007: forum for food sovereignty, there was a very clear declaration against GMOs. Ten years on we are in the same wonderful venue which you constructed for the forum - the Nyéléni Centre - and we are again reasserting the same things.**

True, but there has been progress nevertheless. In 2007 we were at a very low point, because Burkina Faso had introduced GM cotton, which created a lot of problems for farmers. Today, there is no denying that GMOs have impoverished farmers and brought nothing positive to the government of Burkina Faso either. It is sad that 10 years were wasted to reach this conclusion. What we say is that although it was painful for farmers, it is a great lesson for other African countries. GMOs are an illusion, they don't answer any real developmental need in Africa.

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**In 2007, we didn't only talk about the importance of seeds, but also all agricultural biodiversity, and how this forms part of the environment and ecology that underpins production.**

Yes, I think we planted a seed that germinated very well, by resisting. [Farmers'] seeds are important, more so than the more engineered/certified versions of governments. Today, AGRA, Bill Gates Foundation, are forcing African governments to put in place policies for [the adoption of] what they call 'improved seeds'. These policies benefit the organisations, not the farmers. We cannot lose the power of farmers' seeds. This is why we are

cataloguing them, and making sure that they are preserved and maintained year after year, so that our future can rely on these varieties, and not the GMOs.

**And livestock as well?**

Of course, it also includes livestock species; chicken, sheep, goats, cows as well. All traditional breeds.

**And soils, bees?**

Yes all of this. It is the entire environment that we preserve. 'Régénération naturelle assistée' is a method used by farmers to regenerate biodiversity on-farm.

**Over the past 10 years, the industry and researchers have developed GM 2.0 (e.g. synthetic biology). It includes all sorts of technologies such as gene editing and gene drives, which the industry calls 'new science' rather than GMOs. Do you/ Via Campesina/ROPPA/ have views on industry's development of this?**

We will never venture there. It has no interest for us at all. What matters to farmers is 'what seeds do I have, and which ones can I keep for the following year?' It isn't complicated. We have developed fertiliser techniques that we can control, that don't require us to go on the market dominated by large multinationals, with artificial fertilisers and pesticides. We want an agriculture that is manageable, and controllable by us the farmers, that makes us live healthily and is sustainable for our children's generation.

**Your message for researchers - from those who produce most of the food for most of the people in the world and who would realise food sovereignty - is...?**

Listen to farmers! Listen to farmers! Listen to farmers!

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**CNOP-Mali is a member of Via Campesina. Ibrahima Coulibaly is also President of ROPPA: Le Réseau des organisations paysannes et de producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (Network of Peasant Organizations and Agricultural Producers in West Africa). Patrick Mulvany is an agriculturalist and a member of the Food Ethics Council.**

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<sup>1</sup> Paysan/ne i.e. a man or woman smaller-scale farmer