AGAINST THE GRAIN

August 2012

LAND GRABBING AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

Photo 1. Some participants in the Ouidah workshop (February 2012)

GRAIN

It is a long-standing tradition in many African countries to frown upon the selling of land. When land is snapped up by large agribusiness interests in these countries, it is experienced as a brutal violation of this tradition, one that compromises the lives and livelihoods of entire generations to come. This phenomenon of large-scale land appropriation really took off with the food crisis of 2008. As the many cases of land grabbing identified in West and Central Africa have demonstrated, profit seems to be the only motive pursued. The whole model is inimical to – really a frontal attack on – the goals of food sovereignty, which is fundamentally about human survival, especially in African countries that are still largely rural.

While seeds, water, financing, and energy are all necessary to agriculture, there is one obvious requirement that comes before all of them: you cannot grow food without land. But land grabbing by foreign governments (Kuwait, China, Saudi Arabia, and others) or by wealthy individuals, be they foreigners or nationals, deprives small farmers of that indispensable factor in the food equation. In fact, it turns them into farmworkers on their own land.

At a workshop held by Synergie Paysanne, GRAIN, and RAPDA (the African Network for the Right to Food) with the support of the group "Pain pour le Prochain" in Ouidah (Benin) from 7 to 9 February 2012, thirty or more participants representing small-farm organisations and NGOs active on the land grabbing issue in West and Central Africa engaged in a wide-ranging and trenchant discussion on this issue.

Land grabbing and food sovereignty: the inimical relationship

Food sovereignty is a concept developed by *Via Campesina* in 1996 as an alternative to neoliberal policies and the industrial model of production. It signifies the right of peoples, nations, or unions of nations to define their agricultural and food policies without outside interference, and is inclusive of all stakeholders concerned by the food question.

"Food sovereignty includes:

- prioritising local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit. Hence the need for land reforms, for fighting against GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), for free access to seeds, and for safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed.
- the right of farmers [and] peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced
- agricultural prices linked to production costs: they can be achieved if the countries or unions of states are entitled to impose taxes on excessively cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favour of a sustainable farm production, and if they control production on the inner market so as to avoid structural surpluses;
- the populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices;
- the recognition of women farmers' rights, who play a major role in agricultural production and in food."

La Via Campesina, Porto-Alegre, 2003

The possibility of any of the above goals being realised is threatened by land grabbing, since the land in question is almost always put into industrial agriculture, regardless of whether it's foreign or domestic interests doing the grabbing. This is shown by the following examples:

— In **Cameroon**, in 2006, a subsidiary of the Shaanxi Land Reclamation General Corporation (a/k/a Shaanxi State Farm) named IKO signed a US $120 million investment agreement with the government of Cameroon, thereby acquiring the Nanga-Eboko rice farm and a 99-year lease on a further 10,000 hectares, including 2,000 ha in Nanga-Eboko (near the rice farm), and 4,000 ha in the neighbouring district of Ndjoré. The corporation has begun trialling rice and maize and also plans to grow cassava. In parallel, the Bolloré group has put in oil palm plantations.

— In **Guinée**, the American corporation Farm Lands of Guinea Inc (FLGI) controls over 100,000 ha that it uses to produce corn and soy for export or agrofuels production. British investors (AIMI) are helping to finance the enterprise. In addition, FLGI has been entrusted by the government with prospecting for an additional 1.5 million hectares to lease to other investors – a contract on which it earns a 15% commission.

— In **Côte d'Ivoire**, SIFCA has 47,000 ha of oil palm and sugarcane plantations. In 2007, Wilmar and Olam (Singapore-based agribusiness transnationals) created a joint venture, Nauvu, to acquire a 27% stake in SIFCA, the country's largest sugarcane and oil palm producer. The Billon family has a controlling interest in the corporation, but all its shareholders intend to use SIFCA as a basis for expanding their oil palm plantations in West Africa.

— In **Sierra Leone** in 2010, the Swiss firm Addax took control of 10,000 ha to produce sugar cane for ethanol starting in 2013. In 2011, **SOCFIN**, a subsidiary of the French Bolloré group, rented 12,500 ha for oil palm production. Vietnamese firms are getting ready to launch major rice and rubber projects, which will obtain Chinese financial backing in 2012. As of 2011, a number of European development banks (from Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium) are participating in the project. According to a Sierra Leonean participant in the Ouidah workshop (February 2012), land once used to produce rice for local consumption is now in sugar cane for ethanol. Also in this country, FLG is trying to acquire 11,900 hectares west of the Tai River to produce rice for export.

— In **Senegal**, Saudi Arabia is growing rice to take home to its own citizens, while an Italian firm is producing biofuel for European export. The proposal does not give the names of the Saudi and Senegalese investors. In response to repeated requests from GRAIN, the project's coordinator, Amadou Kiffa Guèye, would only say that the Saudi royal family and rich Senegalese businessmen were involved in the project. He also specified that he had been tasked by the Senegalese government with developing the project proposal, but at the request of Saudi investors. International investment company Foras is involved in a major rice production project and is also setting up vertically integrated poultry production near Dakar, with a projected capacity of 4.8 million birds per year. Foras is the investment arm of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); its main shareholders are the Islamic Development Bank and several conglomerates in the Gulf region, especially that of Saleh Kamel and his Dallah Al-Baraka Group, the Saudi Bin Laden Group, the National Investments Company of Kuwait, and Nasser Kharafi, who, until his recent death, was the world's 48th richest man and the owner of the Americana Group.

Photo 2. Guinean representatives at the Ouidah workshop (February 2012)

— In **Mali**, Libya and Saudi Arabia are growing rice for export as well as sunflower and jatropha for agro-fuels. The Libyan deals include one signed in May 2008 by the Qaddafi and Malian governments giving Malibya, a subsidiary of the Libya Africa Investment Portfolio, a renewable 50-year lease on 100,000 ha of land in the territory governed by the Office du Niger. Malibya got the land for free in exchange for a promise to develop irrigated crops. Malibya was also given unlimited water rights at the same rates paid by small consumers. By 2009, Malibya had completed a 40-kilometre irrigation channel but the project was suspended when the Qaddafi regime fell in 2011. In January 2012, the new Libyan government, the National Transitional Council (NTC), stated that it would stand by "good" investments in Mali and would pursue agricultural projects elsewhere in Africa, naming only Sudan and countries "near Libya." Saudi Arabia: Foras has completed a pilot study on 5,000 ha obtained as part of a long-term lease in the area governed by the Office du Niger. Foras wants to expand this to 50,000-100,000 ha, the first stage in an even larger project aiming to produce rice on 700,000 ha in various African countries.

— In **Congo**, South African groups are growing rice, corn, and soy, some of which goes to feed poultry. "Congo Agriculture" is a corporation set up by South African agribusiness interests to establish large-scale farms in Congo-Brazzaville. The corporation obtained 80,000 ha from the government under a 30-year lease, 48,000 of this in the district of Malolo. This was split into 30 farms that are divided up among the South African farmers participating in the operation. The corporation has close ties to AgriSA, the main association representing industrial-scale farms in South Africa. In December 2010, Agence France Presse reported that the government of Congo-Brazzaville had signed an agreement with Atama Plantation, a Malaysian company, granting concessions on a total of 470,000 ha in the northern region of La Cuvette and the northwestern region of Sangha. Atama has announced its intention to grow oil palm on 180,000 ha under these concessions.

— In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, oil palm is being grown for biodiesel.

— In **Gabon**, foreign investors are growing rice for export to Persian Gulf countries, while oil palm for biodiesel is being grown on behalf of Singapore.

— In **Benin**, Chinese interests are growing vegetables, corn, and sugarcane for export to the home country, according to Bodéa Simon, Administrative Secretary of Synergie Paysanne. China National Complete Import and Export Corporation Group (COMPLANT) operated as a Chinese foreign aid office until 1993; today, it is traded on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange and its main shareholder is the State Development & Investment Corporation, the largest state-owned holding company in China. In 2010, a subsidiary of COMPLANT named Hua Lien International announced its intention to set up a US $5 billion venture with COMPLANT and the China-Africa Development Fund to implement ethanol production in several African countries. The venture is to be launched in Benin and extended to other countries later. The venture will be based on COMPLANT's extensive recent investment in sugarcane and manioc, which includes an 18,000 ha plantation in Jamaica, a 4,800 ha sugarcane and manioc plantation in Benin, and a 1,320 ha sugarcane plantation and refinery in Sierra Leone. In 2006, COMPLANT announced its intention to expand its landholdings in Sierra Leone to 8,100 ha for the purpose of growing manioc.

Summing up

In general, these investments are characterized by discretion if not utter secrecy, since the subject is politically and socially sensitive. For this reason, it is not always easy to get information about them, especially at the local and national levels. The NGO Nature Tropicale and the organization Synergie Paysanne discovered this while shooting a documentary film on the subject a few months ago, when they were denied an interview with Chinese and Kuwaiti investors in Benin.

Of the 416 cases of land grabbing we have identified, 228 are in Africa.

- Some commentators have claimed that these contracts are "win-win," in that they are designed to protect cash flows and the agricultural model they perpetuate. But while the land grabbers win in every way imaginable, what happens to the small farmers dispossessed of the land that fed their ancestors, their grandparents, their parents and themselves? What do they win?
- For others, land grabbing is clearly being done against the interests of local people. Therefore, they mobilize resistance against it, putting forward food sovereignty as the real solution to the food crisis.

Table 1: Percentage of farmland controlled by foreign agri-food interests in West and Central Africa.

Country	Percentage	Land area leased or sold to foreign investors for agri-food production
Benin	Arable land: 10% Farmland: 3% Total area: 2%	236,100 ha
Gabon	Arable land: 128% Farmland: 8% Total area: 2%	415,000 ha
Ghana	Arable land: 21% Farmland: 6% Total area: 4%	907,000 ha
Guinée	Arable land: 56% Farmland: 11% Total area: 7%	1,608,215 ha
Liberia	Arable land: 434% Farmland: 67% Total area: 16%	1,737,000 ha
Mali	Arable land: 6% Farmland: 1% Total area: 0.3%	372,167 ha
Nigeria	Arable land: 2% Farmland: 1% Total area: 1%	542,500 ha
Republic of Congo	Arable land: 134% Farmland: 3% Total area: 2%	670,000 ha
Dem. Republic of Congo	Arable land: 6% Farmland: 2% Total area: 0.2%	401,000 ha
Senegal	Arable land: 12% Farmland: 5% Total area: 2%	460,000 ha
Sierra Leone	Arable land: 46% Farmland: 15% Total area: 7%	501,250 ha

* Land agreements with foreign investors as a percentage of country's agricultural land area (FAO figures for 2009), where "arable land" means areas used for temporary cropping, temporary pastureland, market gardens, family gardens, and temporary fallows; "farmland" includes arable land, permanent cropland, and permanent pastureland; and "total area" means the total area of the country, including internal waterways but not coastal waters. Figures are rounded.

The agri-food production presented in **Table 1** is mainly exported, yet West Africa has a critical food insecurity problem as shown by the figures in **Table 2**.

Table 2: Food insecurity in West Africa

Country	Total population	Number of undernourished people	Prevalence of undernourishment
Benin	8.4 million	1.0 million	12%
Mali	12.4 million	1.5 million	12%
Niger	14.1 million	2.3 million	16%
Senegal	11.9 million	2.3 million	19%

Cafiero C., Food Security Statistics 2006-2008, http://www.fao.org/economic/ess/ess-fs/en

In short, governments (Kuwait, China, Saudi Arabia, Libya, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), etc.) and multinational corporations (Bolloré, Addax, etc.) have been putting Africa under the boot of agribusiness (GRAIN 2010). As to the MCA/MCC, countries including Senegal, Liberia, Mali, Ghana, and Benin have, each in its own way, had dealings with it. Rightly or wrongly, these governments have assumed that merely knuckling under to the MCA/MCC financing requirements will be enough to keep the money flowing. However, the Central American experience shows that this is not always the case, especially if the government takes a direction displeasing to Washington. Thus, for example, the US stopped funding Nicaragua when the Sandinistas were elected to power. But when an illegal coup d'état took place in Honduras in 2009, MCC financing there was unaffected.

Ultimately, the inescapable conclusion is that land grabbing, by its very design, serves the interests of those doing the grabbing, to the detriment of the local people. And this is why these projects are always carried out in secret: if the people knew what was going on, they might well rise up in revolt.

Reactions of the Ouidah workshop participants (February 2012)

According to Yombouno, a Guinean farmer, 43% of the land in Haute Guinée is in the sights of the land grabbers. In that context, food sovereignty emerges as a challenge for everyone in Guinean society. With independence, the large plantations formerly managed by the French passed into private hands. But today the country is a democracy, and the tribal chiefs have taken a position against this entrenched landholding arrangement.

The representative from **Sierra Leone** highlighted the dual dispossession of women that land grabbing represents. Women's access to land has always been limited for many reasons. But today, land grabbing has incremental harmful impacts on the women of his country (the gender effect of land grabbing). In support of this analysis, it was mentioned during the workshop that women are responsible for producing 90% of the rice in **Benin** and men only 10%. As agribusiness gobbles up land, how will these women continue to produce rice at the local level? Moreover, according to Laurin Ayatomè of WILDAF, about 80% of Beninese women are employed in agriculture. Thus, it seems clear that women are the first victims of land grabbing.

On another note, nearly all African governments charge tax on land either at the national or the municipal level. At the same time, land management in Africa, whether by national governments, municipalities, or even local communities, feeds social injustice in several regions of the continent. For example, women are excluded from direct management of land, as in the cases of Avrankou (southeastern Benin), Sierra Leone, Senegal, and elsewhere.

A justified concern of a different order was expressed by the mayor of Djidja, Placide Avimadjenon, one of the rare municipal officials to fight the phenomenon of land grabbing in West and Central Africa. He is concerned about

Photo 3. Photo of an MCA billboard advertisement on the Aflao-Accra highway in Ghana (January 2012)

increasing disinterest in working the land on the part of the youth of Benin, and indeed of all of Africa. “Young people don’t want to do that anymore,” he stated. “And if so, how can we justify the fight against land grabbing? The multinationals will claim that their way is the only way.”

A number of participants in the Ouidah workshop emphasised the responsibility of African governments and politicians, who:

1) facilitate foreign land grabs under the guise of “attracting foreign investment”;

2) invest in agriculture without aiming for food sovereignty. This is the case of Mali, where 1.187 trillion CFA francs are invested in agriculture but almost none of it goes into family agriculture, according to the Via Campesina representative.

Conclusion

If we are going to promote food sovereignty, then we absolutely must strengthen the role and responsibility of small farmers and food processors at the local and national levels. In parallel, we must look for convergences among all the different movements working against land grabbing and for food sovereignty. For example, campaigns against land grabbing should ally themselves with campaigns for the preservation of heritage seeds, against GMOs, and in favour of access to water. All these campaigns and struggles, working together, will come up with innovative alternatives that can help us build a “new world agricultural order.”

“In agricultural societies, power is wielded by those who control the land.” This is no doubt why Jacques Diouf, the former director general of the FAO, felt it necessary to warn the world about the phenomenon of land grabbing by foreign countries and multinationals – to all appearances, a new form of colonisation.

Finally, according to Didier-Hubert Madafime (2012), “Land is considered not only an economic or environmental good but also a social, cultural, and ontological resource. It remains an important factor in the construction of social identity, in the organisation of religious life, and in the production and reproduction of cultures. That is, land is an integral part of the spirituality of any society. When land is sold, the cultural chain is broken” (“Terres d’ici et d’ailleurs” radio program, Office de Radio et Télévision du Bénin (ORTB), June 2012).

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Going further

Visit http://www.farmlandgrab.org, which is managed by GRAIN and updated daily. You can also sign up for weekly mailings: http://www.ourlists.org/lists/farmlandgrab-subscribe.html

Download data on over 400 cases of land grabbing published by GRAIN in March 2012: http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4479-grain-releases-data-set-with-over-400-global-land-grabs

Watch the video interview with Simon Bodéa, Secretary-General of Synergie Paysanne in Benin, where he discusses the problem of land grabbing. Video by Panos Afrique de l'Ouest, taken at the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012: http://youtu.be/sGGpOZqlhIc

GRAIN is a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. Against the grain is a series of short opinion pieces on recent trends and developments in the issues that GRAIN works on. Each one focuses on a specific and timely topic.

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GRAIN,
Girona 25 pral., 08010 Barcelona, Spain
Tel: +34 93 301 1381, Fax: +34 93 301 16 27
Email: grain@grain.org
www.grain.org