August 2014 | Sanamadougou and Sahou have to stay: Stopp Landgrabbing – in Mali and everywhere!

August 2014: International Appeal by the European section of Afrique-Europe-Interact

Early 2013 Mali briefly made international headlines. Islamic militia occupied the North of the country, an international military intervention headed by France followed, and bigger cities such as Timbuktu and Gao could be liberated. Still, for the bulk of the population life has hardly changed – neither in the North nor in other parts of the country. The social situation of small farmers, which make up about 75 per cent of the population, is particularly disastrous. Typical examples are the villages Sanamadougou and Sahou, 270 kilometres north east of the capital Bamako. As little ago as 2009 these villages donated 40 tons of millet to the Mali government to alleviate a national food crisis. Today, they are dependent on food donations themselves, because the global booming sale of fertile forests, farmlands and pastures to investment fonds, banks and corporations have caused violent eviction in Sanamadougou and Sahou also. The population had to experience first hand that rural resistance faces brutal suppression even in comparatively liberal countries like Mali. These occurrences have made Sanamadougou and Sahou well known far beyond Mali – a symbol in the struggle for collective land rights and with that, food sovereignty.

It all started on the 31st of May 2010. At the time, the Malian large-scale investor Modibo Keita and his company Moulin Moderne du Mali signed a 30-year lease agreement about 18,286 acres in the M'Bewani Séribabougou region. It included an option to obtain a further 49,421 acres during a second stage (a huge area equivalent to the playing area of approximately 20,000 international rugby fields). However, the local circumstances did not suit Modibo Keita – a businessman with the best of connections to the political elite in Bamako, who made most of his immense fortune with grain trade. Therefore, he offered several villages located 30 kilometres further south to swap their land for ridiculously little money, gifts or substitute land. They all declined, only one village swapped 1,977 acres for a small piece of irrigated farmland. Modibo Keita took advantage of this location in order to greedily collar more pieces of land, among them in Sanamadougou and Sahou – although a current government report states that of all things the areas of the two villages were supposed to be included in a 988 acres offshoot as part of the overall 18,286 acres-deal. If this is true or just a post hoc attempt to justify the situation is anyone’s guess. The fact is that Mobido Keita rushed to build two irrigation canals – which hindered farmers to access their fields – and began to grow potatoes and other crops himself on a grand scale (although with only moderate success).

From day one the farmers put up massive resistance, particularly since the first huge shock awaited them not long after signing the contract: On the 18th of June 2010 without a word of warning, Modibo Keita ordered the logging of numerous ancient trees in Sanamadougou. These trees had been essential for the village’s agroforestry that is greatly adapted to the particular climatic conditions. But Modibo Keita brought with him 70 country constables which violently repressed the peaceful protest of the farmers on their own fields. Approximately 40 people were arrested, 8 remained arrested for up to 6 months. Afterwards nightly attacks on Sanamadougou and Sahou were carried out through gendarmerie and National Guard; these included deliberately targeted rapes. An elderly woman was beaten to death in front of the eyes of her son, others badly injured, two women suffered miscarriages.

The population did not succumb to intimidation; they wrote letters to various politicians and government representatives, took part in demonstrations and participated in national and international farmer gatherings. More still: With the help of CMAT („Convergence Malienne contre les Accaparements de Terres“), a union of various farmers and human rights

organisations, they brought the issue before the court in Markala. Court proceedings began on the 22nd of February 2012, but were then delayed. This was not changed by the fact that on 22nd March 2013, following a cabinet resolution, the minister for regional planning and decentralisation wrote a letter to the responsible governor of Segou, explicitly calling him to end the unlawful and inhumane activities of Modibo Keita.

The situation today is tenser than ever – especially because of the famine that has a firm grip on the population, especially in Sanamadougou. It causes a dependency on the support of neighbouring villages or individual family members in Bamako or overseas. Therefore, the alternatives are obvious: Either the farmers will regain their land or they are forced to leave – like 23 other households in Sanamadougou have already done it since last May.

The experiences of Sanamadougou and Sahou are by no means exceptions. On the contrary, since 2003, at least 1,334,369 acres of land has been sold by the Malian government and about another 936,529 acres pre-contracts have been made (as of May 2011). The circumstances are the same as in other parts of the world: In secret, that is without consultation with the local population, with no environmental or social impact assessments and to ridiculously cheap conditions (among them low interests on leases and purchases, decade-long „tax holidays“ and non-viable water tariffs). Urban displacements and land confiscations by corrupt politicians and administrators can be added to the list. Especially the policy of dispossession is a huge scandal that has been discussed for a long time in Mali’s public. Dispossession happens mainly in Office du Niger – an enormous irrigated region fed by the Niger, Sanamadougou and Sahou are also a part of this area (although they are not connected to the canal system). In practice, if farmers at the end of a harvest cycle are not able to pay their water fees, their land is going to be confiscated without compensation, even if they have farmed it for decades.

Officially, the large scale sale of fertile lands is justified with the statement that the tenant or buyer are contributing to the general development of the country. However, the examples Sanamadougou and Sahou illustrate that this is not the case. Instead of guaranteeing food security, farmers are being expelled in large numbers. Often individual family members feel forced to migrate – mostly to West Africa, some to Europe. Additionally, crops for export and agrofuel crops are grown on stolen land. In Mali, the proportion of agrofuel crops is 40 per cent, 66 per cent across Africa. Finally, the ecological disaster: Industrial Agriculture intensifies soil exhaustion, exacerbates climate change and leads to the lowering of river and groundwater levels (“Watergrabbing”).

Back to Sanamadougou und Sahou: Both villages are at a crossroads, something has to happen. In the short term, villagers need assistance with food, but in general their land has to be returned and reparation for the damage suffered has to be paid (regardless of whether Modibo Keita can provide a real estate title or not). We urge the government of Mali therefore to take the necessary measures as soon as possible. Furthermore, in the medium term there seems to be no way around the need for support of smallholder agriculture that to date ensures the bulk of food security in Mali (as indeed in most part of the world). Because it must not be, that single investors obtain 49,421, 123,552 or even 247.105 acres of land, while the poorer half of the anyway poor farmers in the Office du Niger together own not more than 210,039 acres. Finally the customary law on ground should be unrestrictedly enforced, as it is provided in chapter 43 of the Malian land law. According to this law land, which is used individually respectively collectively can only be expropriated, when this serves the public welfare. And in the case of Sanamadougou and Sahou not even then. Because these two ancient villages have cultivated their land already in pre-colonial times, that is before the official registration of the land by the state authorities, as it is written in a letter of the village chiefs to the Prime Minister in Juli 2014.

In contrast we want to ask the German government to exercise their influence and within the framework of development cooperation take a stand for the restitution of the robbed land to Sanamadougou and Sahou. In this context it should also be examined, what in Bamako is considered to be an open secret: That the machines used by Modibo Keita were diverted from means, with which Germany has since the year 2004 among other things been supporting the growing of potatoes. In addition Germany should stop all measures, which allow respectively facilitate landgrabbing – for example the admixture quotas of agrofuel which are provided in the frame of the European directive for biofuel.

This call has been written in Europe, therefore conclusively a quotation from the already mentioned letter of the two village chiefs: “Despite the almost complete expropriation of our fields we stick to the demand for the preservation of our villages, our fields, our fertile trees, our historical and cultural sites, which represent our values and landmarks – yesterday, today and tomorrow.”

(*) The transnational network Afrique-Europe-Interact works together with inhabitants of different villages in the Office du Niger – among others from Sanamadougou and Sahou. Representatives of the Malian and the European section of Afrique-Europe-Interact have visited these two villages several times in this year, especially in order to prepare common actions. In August 2014 Afrique-Europe-Interact has donated 10 tons of millet in order to bridge the actual famine.