

April 2015 | The Connection between Urban and Rural Areas

Report on the solidarity work with peasant movements in Mali by Olaf Bernau. This text has been first published in the monthly journal *ak – analyse & kritik* in april 2015

Since 2012 the transnational network Afrique-Europe-Interact has been forming alliances with small-scale farmers in Mali, who have been affected by different forms of land grabs. In this report we want to take stock from different perspectives, to join the processes in Mali to the debates on transnational organizing and internationalistic solidarity work in Europe.

The scene that takes place in March 2015 seems completely anachronistic from a European perspective: A very old and blind village mayor, sits down in front of his doorless hut between two other very old men. The three of them want to welcome the 12-member delegation of the transnational network Afrique-Europe-Interact (AEI), among them three activists from Europe. However, the current situation of the village, which is situated 250 kilometres north-east of the capital Bamako, is far more dramatic than what could be guessed from the customary serenity of this welcoming ceremony. Since 2010 Sahou and the neighbouring village Sanamadougou have gradually lost the best part of their arable land through land grabs. This existential catastrophe is emphasized by the cynical fact that between the narrow mud walls lining the small roads of Sahou you can always hear the humming of the machines and cooling systems of the agribusiness company Moulins Modernes du Mali, especially at night. CEO Modibo Keita has been known to be a businessman closely linked to the political class in Bamako, which must be the reason why he managed to bogart the fields of the two villages – even though the lease showed a completely different area 30 kilometers further north. This agrees with the fact that last year even the Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita visited the fields of Moulins Modernes du Mali, along with his colleague from Burkina Faso, the long-term dictator Blaise Compaoré who has meanwhile been overthrown by a popular uprising. Germany, too, is indirectly involved in the support of this unscrupulous businessman, who interestingly enough is known to be an exemplary modernizer of African agriculture. The German state-owned Investment and Development Company (Deutsche Entwicklungsgesellschaft DEG) holds a 21.4 percent stake in the Malian Development Bank BNDA, which in turn has granted Modibo Keita four large loans in recent years.

In short, Sahou is, together with Sanamadougou, a typical example of that mechanism that was established back in colonial times: Selective integration into (global) market exploitation-processes and at the same time an exclusion from any political or material participation. Concretely: Both of the two villages lie in the Office du Niger, a region that was founded as an independent administrative unit by the French colonial power in 1920. By using forced labour France built the gigantic Markala dam which dammed the Niger and made it possible to irrigate a large area of the originally completely dry Sahel with a widely ramified canal system. While the colonial power originally pushed ahead with the cultivation of cotton for the French textile industry, later the land was given to small-scale farmers. Today, however, the Office du Niger has become the place for investments to make millions in profit – which includes massive expulsions. Because the fact that there are infrastructural requirements for irrigation has made land purchases a profitable business in this region. Although the Malian government talks about giving the Malian people food security with the help of land investments, over 50 percent of the signed contracts will go to the production of agro fuel plants and export cash crops, not to mention the fact that thousands of small-scale farmers have already lost their land and therefore the means for their daily nutrition.

So it is by no means a coincident, that AEI has become involved in Sanamadougou and Sahou. In 2012 a 30-member delegation of the network visited the region for the first time – and has

since left one or the other footprint: As an example AEI initiated the primary level trade union COPON, the Coordination Paysannes au Office du Niger (the coordination of farmers in Office du Niger). Furthermore a solidarity campaign was initiated and AEI fought for land for several families which unlawfully hadn't been allocated to them before. For two reasons it is worth taking a closer look at these initiatives in the following report which focuses on practical issues. Firstly, it can be shown how urban and rural struggles can be connected on a long-term basis and how South and North can fight together. Secondly, the discussion with peasant movements is important for reasons of principle: It is a fact that more than half of the world's population is still living in the country – even if metropolitan leftists point at exploding urbanization rates. Most of the time they just don't want to admit their own identification with what critics of globalization like Ulrich Brand call the “imperial way of life”: a resource-intensive, capitalistic lifestyle, firmly anchored in the consumer culture, which is especially problematic from a climate point of view. It should be added that particularly the industrialized agriculture contributes significantly to climate change. In other words: land struggles are climate struggles. And this includes the double question of transformation: What does development mean in a rural environment suffering under poverty in a way that is hard to imagine from a Western perspective? And how do the societies in the rich centres have to change to avoid the ultimate climate catastrophe?

When three years ago AEI showed up in Office du Niger for the first time, it was all about getting to know each other. The starting point were contacts to different villages, among them Kourouma and Koyan Koura. These contacts had been made by activists from Bamako within the context of the Malian Social Forum. On a practical level, both sides were confronted with unusual, sometimes certainly challenging discoveries. The European activists were considerably irritated by the gender roles, for example the fact that men debated in the assembly while the women cooked or sat separately in the last row or on the opposite side of the village square – a situation that smelled a lot like patriarchal dominance. Later it became apparent that this showed only a small part of the complexity of the local gender relations. On the other hand there were a lot of positive experiences – also on both (!) sides. The farmers were especially pleased when the delegation came for an extended visit in the glistening sun to have a look at their fields, something that neither politicians nor representatives of NGOs would usually do. So the group of 20 Malian and 10 European activists had unknowingly passed their first litmus test.

In the meantime, due to the occupation of the North by jihadists and Tuareg rebels, the Office du Niger had been cut off to a large extent since April 2012. In the following time meetings with the farmers had to take place in Bamako and so it wasn't possible to talk on site about buying a larger grain mill for an AEI-women's collective. It was all the more pleasing when during our AEI-delegation's visit in May 2014, we were easily able to tie in with the contacts which had been made two years before. Concretely the AEI-activists in Bamako, in the Office du Niger, and in Europe had intensively discussed the idea of a one-day farmer's assembly, including a protest march in the provincial capital of Niamey. When it came to putting this into practice, the idea was widely appreciated and it was decided on a 30-member preparation group with representatives of the peasants of all seven administrative regions of the Office du Niger. The only catch: After AEI had announced protests with up to 1000 expected participants during a well attended press conference in Bamako and 36 hours before the demonstration was supposed to start, the Ministry of Interior prohibited it on flimsy grounds. This caused a considerable stir among the public and so did the one-day alternative event in Bamako which was attended by 50 farmers, delegates from the Office du Niger.

But when the demonstration was forbidden the sting had been taken out of the dynamics of the protests. In the first place because shortly afterwards the rainy season began, which is the main working season – including Ramadan. But also because social processes are known to be enormously fragile in Mali, because under the ruling conditions of poverty and social long-term

crisis not many stabilising factors can be found. One of the reasons is a lack of material resources, which would be needed to stay in contact continuously. Nevertheless, the experiences were good enough, and so when there was a third Malian-European delegation visiting in March 2015, there was a major breakthrough. The formerly mentioned primary level trade Union COPON had just recently been registered as an official association and a constitutive assembly was organized in Kourouma which was attended by 100 delegates from all across the Office du Niger at the 8th of March. AEI-members from Kourouma had spent several weeks to mobilize visiting numerous villages and made six one-hour radio shows at the left radio station Kayira.

The course of events in Sanamadougou and Sahou runs quite contrary to this: Initially not only experiences with massive state violence but also numerous disappointments with supporting groups, journalists and politicians have led to considerable scepticism towards AEI. This was further complicated by the fact that a group which had in the meantime been active in supporting the villages had tried to deliberately discredit AEI in order to claim a kind of exclusive representation for itself. As a consequence the AEI-delegation of Malian and European activists arriving in May 2014 was expelled from the village for 36 hours because no consensus could be reached amongst the inhabitants of the village in regard to a possible cooperation with AEI. Through intensive talks involving Malians alone, the barrier was eventually overcome so that during 2014 numerous delegation visits could be carried out as well as a delivery of a food donation comprising four tons of millet. Additionally, many events in solidarity with AEI took place in Germany, including a number of official letters to Malian government agencies, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and to miscellaneous western embassies in Bamako. During this phase several parliamentary inquiries filed by the member of parliament Niema Movassat (Left-Party) proved to be extremely helpful. One of a number of results following these activities was an invitation by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to AEI to a meeting in which all together eight high-ranking staff members belonging to the BMZ, The German Development Loan Corporation (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau – KfW) and one of its member companies, The German Investment and Development Company (Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft – DEG) participated as well as the German embassy in Bamako. At issue of the two and a half hours of the conversation were Sanamadougou and Sahou and an irrigation project financed by The German Development Loan Corporation (KfW) which resulted in corrupt functionaries and village-heads receiving land rather than the initially designated smallholders. The meeting was insofar of particular importance as AEI gained new information which serves as a basis to gear further activities accordingly. One crucial information is that in September 2014 the African Development Bank (of which Germany holds a share of 4.1%) granted Modibo Keita a credit worth 16.8 Million Euro only if two conditions were fulfilled: Firstly, that no further court cases were pending and secondly, that affected families in Sanamadougou and Sahou had received compensation.

Even though both was guaranteed, the latest visit by the AEI-Delegation brought to light that this is not the case. Particularly striking in this respect is the fact that the processing of the complaint against Modibo Keita filed by the two villages in February 2012 has been dragged out for over two years by the responsible court. To build up additional pressure concerning this issue further activities in Mali as well as Europe are planned. Also, during the latest visit by the AEI delegation intensive talks with the mentioned smallholder families who were cheated of their land took place. After AEI activists presented the results of their research to a representative of the German embassy at which the Malian liaison officer to the Office du Niger for the irrigation project of The German Development Loan Corporation (KfW) was present, redistribution of land to the affected families had begun within one week. If this presents a thorough solution to the problem is yet to be seen, but it seems to be a very promising start.

Against this backdrop shifting the angle in the following section(s) appears useful. For one, in order to shed light onto central internal challenges or difficulties of the cooperative effort undertaken by AEI along three key issues and secondly to arrive at political conclusions.

Key issue difference in daily experiences: Not only gender relations but also other dimensions of everyday experiences prompt differences between the involved actors to become visible – for example the relative powerful position of a village head or religious cum spiritual practices. Hence rural-urban or South-North cooperation demands a high level of frustration tolerance as sometimes have to be put aside. At the same time mutual interest and nosiness as well as refraining from all too hasty judgements are important for some things turn out quite differently to what they seem at first glance. One example for this is the position of women. While the common practice of Malian female AEI-activists to hold women-only caucuses doesn't seem to provoke problems or criticism, many other practices meet the scepticism of European activist or are openly criticised as patriarchal by Malian women. Generally speaking, social processes appear to be a kind of picture puzzle that, depending on the individual angle, lets different aspects of the same matter take centre stage and evokes degrees of connectedness or distance accordingly.

Key issue money: The demand for self-determined networking amongst farmers is enormous. This also points to a considerable scepticism towards mainstream trade unions.

For this reason the observation that it is primarily the lack of adequate financing that frequently hampers organisational processes is particularly depressing. To put it bluntly, be it transportation, mobile communication or air time on radio: without money from the European AEI-section mobilising rallies or delegation meetings could at best be carried through in a rudimentary manner. This however raises very specific questions within AEI, such as: How much money is spent on what; in other words how is money distributed and most of all who remains at the wheel? Under conditions of extreme austerity exceedingly difficult dynamics swiftly unfold as soon as money is involved. Cheating, albeit on a small scale, happens on a daily basis and often it is simply arguments about the appropriate amount of the daily food allowance during delegation trips. To alleviate the situation AEI has developed a concerted, i.e. African-European, routine in budget management. But still: In Mali money issues are an ever frustrating perennial theme, not least particularly for Malian activists who face the difficult and even humiliating fact that often external financing serves as the primary catalyst in getting already envisaged activities or plans into gear.

Key issue speech and writing: Most farmers in Office du Niger speak Bambara or other common Malian languages. Hardly anyone speaks French simply because they had not visited school. The other way round, activists living in Germany usually have no command of Malian languages unless they stem from Mali or neighbouring countries. However, this poses a far lesser problem than the fact that without exception official Malian documents are written in French. As a consequence people often don't understand them. Adding to language barriers is the fact that to most farmers writing as such or "the written document" isn't a relevant category. A circumstance that the opposing party exploits quite brutally also in form of manipulative shadow-boxing matches in negotiations with the African Development Bank. In other words: The duty to put all their efforts into conveying relevant information rest on those to whom the written form is accessible. This (paradoxically) applies also to the European activists.

Finally a word regarding the political context: The fundamental aim is that the farmers regain the land they were robbed of or at least demand access to that land. This is to underline once again, that the discourse commonly cultivated in Europe, that half of (Wes-)Africa is sitting on packed suitcases absolutely defies reality. Migration is an emergency strategy or a survival strategy and when it works more or less without problems, which is less frequently the case, it can actually contribute to local development. However, what is actually needed are a

comprehensive land reform as well as further measures to support the development of smallholder agriculture such as low prices for seeds and fertilizer, marketing opportunities and the like. In short: All that which was progressively cut down over years by the structural adjustment programmes of the IMF. Already now for many families merely about 0.5 to 1.5 hectare of land are available. Yet, not least to allow for fallow periods, at least three hectares would be necessary.

If one additionally considers that the Malian population is likely to have doubled by 2050 and that annually 150 000 hectares of land fall to erosion in Mali alone, it becomes obvious that that what happens in Office du Niger quite literally resembles a class struggle. One instance of this is the physical attack on the AEI activist Bakari Traoré in the aftermath of one of his latest reports on Radio Kayira by family members of a official followed by publicly slandering him via the official radio station of Office du Niger, asserting the he was a sluggard and a liar as the AEI delegation would not visit Kourouma at all and had left Office du Niger already after visiting the more southern villages Snamadougou and Sahou. In this respect it had been extremely important that a few days later Radio Keyira aired a programme about the foundation meeting of COPON in Kourouma in which voices of European activists could also be heard – 1:0 for AEI in the show of strength on air!

This however, also touches on another issue: Even when farmers defend their right to a self-determined existence as farmers, the actual outrageousness of the extremely harsh living conditions should not be lost sight of. Only who is able to really imagine the complete lack of infrastructure accompanied by extreme poverty, incredible heat and masses of dust can fully grasp what an admirable achievement it is that Malian people continually manage to keep up social cohesion in everyday life – symbolised by the frequent shaking of hands, also within the own group and occasionally several times within one hour with the same people.

It is here where we have to put the leverage. For of course, in countries like Mali self-determined development is absolutely necessary. Without real democracy, that is political participation of the grassroots, assistance from the outside does not reach the broad mass of the population. At the same time issues pertaining to a (non-capitalist) economy operating beyond the paradigm of the economics of growth need to be discussed more urgently than ever. Not only for reasons to do with climatic change, but also to put a stop to those dynamics which time and time again lead Africa to selectively come under the wheels of the profit oriented utilisation interests of rich industrial nations and emerging economies.

Last but not least: Without the transnational network AEI many of the activities and results outlined above, would not exist – neither the primary level trade union COPON, nor re-distributed land or the newly gained perspectives for resistance for Sanamadougou and Sahou. Having said that, this doesn't mean, that a homogeneous actor has been formed. Even though a certain understanding for the way others tick can be reached, different economic, social (non-)religious or (non-)spiritual everyday practices let considerable rifts remain between the various people involved. To say it in a nutshell, not so much convergences or similarities form the basis of the cooperation described here (as is the case at Blockupy for instance), but mutual respect and diversity. This at times does not appear to be particularly romantic and instilling a sense of sense of identity but it works which is but the most important message of this workshop report.