

Complex Realities

Small-scale agriculture is under massive pressure in Mali

By Olaf Bernau – first published in: ak – analyse & kritik – zeitung für linke Debatte und Praxis / Nr. 574 / 17.8.2012

The plans were ambitious, when in the beginning of March 2012 a 30-headed delegation of the transnational network Afrique-Europe-Interact – among them 10 activists from Europe – started their journey from the Malian capital of Bamako to Office de Niger, which is situated 270 kilometers north-east of the city. What started the idea for this trip was the fact, that the government of this Westafrican country has sold over 900,000 hectares of the crop and grazing land of this highly fertile Niger inland delta to transnationally operating banks, investment funds and corporations between the year 2003 and today. Correspondingly this region has frequently become the arena for public actions against landgrab. The last event took place in November 2011 on occasion of a counter-conference in Niono, which was mainly organized by the international peasant's movement La Via Campesina. So it came as a surprise, that the delegation came upon a completely different situation when they arrived. In meetings with base trade unionists, village representatives and numerous peasant farmers, landgrab was being mentioned, but generally speaking the conversations were much more complex, reflective and cautious. It became clear, that neo-colonial landgrab is only another brick in the general process of the long-term arranged valorisation and incorporation of the small-scale agriculture into the capitalist world market. We came to the conclusion that the focus on landgrab, which can be seen in the work of many NGOs, social movements, the media and academics should by no means lead to a one-dimensional definition of the problem. This also meant, that in the course of our delegation's journey we had to considerably relativise some of our estimations about the strength of the current resistance against landgrab in Mali or West Africa (1), which we had made before our trip.

This makes it most sensible to begin with a short summery of the most important topics which were communicated during our stay in Office du Niger.

a) Shortage of land: Although the small-scale farming households in Office du Niger benefit from the fact that their land is watered by a canal system fed by the river Niger, many are still suffering from extreme shortage of land. In spite of the permanent growth of the population thousands of families haven't received any additional pieces of land from the administration of Office du Niger during the last decades. The consequence was, that the average fallow time (used for the regeneration of the soil) with a length of 15 years in the 1970s has meanwhile been shortened to a length of only 2 years and has therefore reduced the yields per hectare. Together with high prices for fertilizer, water, and seeds this has led to dramatic spirals of debt, which have harmed other regions of the world before. Not uncommonly do the affected peasants have to sell their complete rice harvest to guarentee the supply for their own families with the lower-cost millet. if necessary even with the help of additional credits.

b) Micro-Landgrab by the corrupt administration: The authorities in Office du Niger toughen the already precarious situation concerning the land by confiscating land without any compensation as soon as the peasants are in default with their water bill. This administration act is being carried out by force, if seen as required by the authorities, no matter if the land has been tilled for 3, 10, or 30 years. The reasons for the delay of the payments don't interest the administration – no matter if there has been a pest infestation or the centrally maintained drain ditches had been clogged and the whole rice harvest has got spoiled in the water which couldn't run off. In cases like these a commission featuring equal representation is supposed to

accurately examine the facts, but the declared recommendations of this commission are very rarely accepted by the administration. This aspect most likely shows the real nature of these confiscations of land, as these are not acted out in the interest of the general public. On the contrary, the employees of the authorities snare the land in a corrupt manner. They optionally give it to their friends and relatives or lease it to their fellow party members, who they are clientistically engaged with, business partners, or government officials. In short, the small-scale farmers in Office du Niger are considerably confronted with micro-landgrab, which is the reason why, again and again within the context of our conversations, the authorized administration was called a post-colonial “vampire system”.

c) Wrong decisions within the agricultural policy: In the course of several sets of structural adjustment measures (by the IMF) the Malian government was – among other things – forced to nearly completely put an end to the financial support of the small-scale agricultural sector. Thus the subsidizations for fertilizers were stopped, the guarantee for fixed prizes, especially in the cotton sector, was not given any more, and the employment of advisors for the peasants ended – the latter having absurd effects in some cases. The peasants reported, that because of the direct pressure from the government, they had planted potatoes this year for the first time. This measure was supposed to compensate for the crop losses of millet in other parts of the country. The only catch is that neither information was provided how potatoes should be harvested and stored, nor had the Ministry of Agriculture arranged a workable marketing structure. The result was, that in spring hundreds of small-scale farmers in Office du Niger were stuck with their potatoes – which meant additional debt, and thus the threat of the loss of their land.

d) Migration: Because of its man-made irrigation system, Office du Niger is considered to be a comparatively privileged region in Mali. Yet the lack of land is so serious that even in this part of the country migration has become an everyday issue. Two things seem especially remarkable: first, it was repeatedly emphasized, that the prime cause for migration is the desire to contribute to the fulfillment of the basic needs of one's family, and – although it often might seem so – doesn't have anything to do with a declining willingness to the rural lifestyle itself. Accordingly, the representative of a base union remarked pointedly or even smugly, that a peasant could survive and live in a much better way with a sufficiently large area of land in Office du Niger than as “an immigrant in Europe or a state employee who doesn't steal” (2). On the other hand some of the people we talked to – also elders – argued in favour of letting the “boys” leave, at least as long as the village couldn't offer them a worthy perspective on their lives. This fatalism (“it's better do die crossing the sea than living a life of misery”), which we had already heard of during the Bamako-Dakar-Caravane in the beginning of 2011, is a highly controversial stance among (West-) African activists (ak 560).

Of course none of the issues outlined above was surprising. What was surprising, however, was the fact, that the large-scale sellouts of fertile arable and pasture land in Office du Niger played only a minor or no role at our meetings. At first appearance this seemed to be related to the fact that large-scale landgrab is yet neither happening nor planned in that part of Office du Niger which we visited. But in the context of our delegation's debates this explanation was soon to be doubted. Instead it became clear, that because of the ubiquitous scarcity of land it would most likely matter to the peasants if huge areas of farmland close to their own land were sold to external investors, considering that the land is the major means of production, which they urgently need to survive. On the contrary the key question should be – so our quintessence – which factors prevent the peasants in Office du Niger from mounting the barricades against the systematic denial of land, especially since resistance against landgrab is by no means unknown, neither in Mali nor worldwide.

We received concrete answers to these questions in particular from the previously cited

representative of a rural base union, who especially stressed two things: on the one hand, the state's authority seems "like a king" to many peasants, especially for those with little education. On the other hand there had been a cycle of struggles against the administrations' micro-landgrab between 2005 and 2008, which had been stifled with the means of massive repression. Thus not only the peasants' resistance and the solidarity among the villages was significantly weakened. This was also the reason why many peasants would fear to publicly take a stand against the large-scale landgrab in Office du Niger, although they definitely judge it as being scandalous. It became clear how difficult and contradictory the situation is through small details, as for example the fact, that the Via Campesina activist and chairman of the Malian peasants' association CNOP, Ibrahim Coulibaly, who is well-known throughout Europe, had never been heard of by the people we talked to in Office du Niger. That way it became clear that in Mali not only the peasants but also the institutional players have extremely limited resources, to an extent, which is very hard to imagine in Europe. As an example it should just be mentioned, that the only office of Via Campesina in Mali has only got one and a half employees, although Mali is a country with 10 million small-scale peasants on an area three times the size of Germany.

In short: A Via Campesina conference against landgrab took place in Niono in November 2011 and the inhabitants of the village Sadamandougou in Office du Niger protested against the destruction of their Karité trees (caused by landgrab) for over two years, which was effective as good publicity (to name just the two best-known examples). But from these facts we cannot get to the conclusion that there is a peasant revolt just around the corner. This at least became clear during our delegation's journey. It seems more appropriate to assume long-term process, which already leads me to some final remarks about the specific circumstances of our visit in Office du Niger:

At the beginning there was skepticism, because despite of the fact that there had been a preliminary delegation from Bamako, it had been rumored in the three villages which we visited, that we were party officials. The spell was broken only after we had extensively visited the fields, as this was an absolutely unusual practice for officials or visitors from Europe. Nevertheless the different realities of life – reaching from the Malian village to Bamako and the Western European metropolis – could hardly be ignored: There were not only material differences, but other questions were raised as well, concerning, for example, gender issues, or language, as Bambara is used as the language of communication in Office du Niger – as it is in many places in Mali. In this respect our contact ended with the agreement, that the contact between Afrique-Europe-Interact and Office du Niger would be developed further primarily by activists in Bamako, while public pressure should be put on investors and other beneficiaries of landgrab in Europe (3).

(1) cf. ak 569: Olaf Bernau. The global resistance is growing. Peasant movements mobilise against neo-colonial landgrab.

(2) The interview was published along with additional interviews and analyses on landgrab in Mali in a 52-page booklet, which Afrique-Europe-Interact has recently published a delegation journey. Order at: nolagerbremen@yahoo.de

(3) In this context reference should be made to a 24-hour-besiegement of the Deutsche Bank in Bremen: initiated by Afrique-europe-interact: cf. www.afrique-europe-interact.net

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