

LOUISA PRAUSE

IF YOU PUT A CATFISH NEXT TO A CAIMAN

TURNING THE LOCAL INTO GLOBAL: RESISTANCE AGAINST
LAND GRABBING IN SENEGAL

In contrast to Latin America, large-scale social movements struggling against land grabbing have not hitherto emerged in Africa. However, this article shows that African land grabs do not pass uncontested. Affected populations as well as a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in the struggle. One prominent struggle against land grabbing is currently taking place in Senegal and this article examines the dynamics of the resistance against this particular land grab.

In recent years, the global food, energy, environmental, and financial crises have led to far-reaching transformations of land use and ownership. The increased demand for agrofuels, rising food prices, the environmental strain on fertile soils and the search for secure investments have led to a dramatic revaluation of land ownership. As a consequence, governments, national and transnational companies and private equity funds invest in what they often call 'idle' lands.¹ One striking feature of this new wave of investments in land is its North-South dynamic, with Africa being the continent where most of the land transactions have taken place. However, many state and private actors from the Global South also purchase land in distant countries; these actors include the Saudi Arabian government and South African agro industry companies such as EMVest. Moreover, land deals are often facilitated by international financial institutions, namely the World Bank and the IMF.

A large debate has sprung up over the positive and negative consequences of this new wave of investments. Actors including the World Bank point to the positive effects of agricultural investments, such as job creation and rising agricultural productivity. In contrast, critical civil society organizations and peasant movements (for example, GRAIN and La Via Campesina) highlight the negative consequences of large-scale land deals for local populations: dispossession, and the destruction of their livelihood or cultural sites. These groups have named this process 'land grabbing'.

'Land grabbing' is a blurry term, and it carries a lot of political baggage. Nevertheless, it has become the standard term in much of the critical debate about large-scale land deals. Following Borras and Franco, I refer to land grabbing as "the capturing of control of relatively vast tracts of land and

other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms, carried out through extra-economic coercion that involves large-scale capital, which often shifts resource use orientation into extraction, whether for international or domestic purposes [...]."² The academic literature on land grabbing has multiplied over the past few years. Much of the work focuses on gathering reliable data to determine the magnitude of the phenomenon as well as the social impact of land grabs.³ Recently the relationship between land and water grabs has gained some attention,⁴ as has the role of the state in facilitating land grabs.⁵ One largely underexplored dimension of land grabbing is the reaction from below to these new dynamics affecting the issue of land.⁶

Land grabbing is a global phenomenon and has sparked diverse reactions by the local populations affected by it. Some land grabs pass completely uncontested. However, large protests have also taken place against land grabbing in Latin America, where strong peasant movements such as *Movimiento de Trabajadores Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil have mobilized thousands of people to demonstrations and land occupations. In contrast, in Africa hardly any similar movements have emerged thus far. This is not to say that people in Africa are not contesting the current dynamics related to large-scale changes in land use, but that resistance remains largely unnoticed by the media and academics. This is partly due to the fact that many of the debates on struggles against land grabbing focus on large-scale protests and open conflicts. However, I suggest that many of these struggles take less spectacular forms, such as lobbying or media campaigns and even include individual acts of everyday resistance. The aim of this paper is to gain a better understanding of precisely those struggles against land grabbing in Africa,

where large-scale protests have remained absent (so far). I therefore analyze the exemplary case of the struggle against a 20,000-hectare agro-industrial project being undertaken by the Italian-Senegalese company Senhuile-Senethanol in the Senegalese region of Ndiaël. After a brief overview of the development of Senhuile-Senethanol's project, I present the key actors involved in the struggle against the land grab. I analyze their framing and identify the different forms of resistance in which they are engaged. I argue that a particularly important strategy of resistance is the contestation of the project on different levels, as this lifts the struggle from the national to the international arena.⁷

The Senhuile-Senethanol plantation was moved to the wetland reserve of Ndiaël in March 2012. Originally the company had intended to develop the intensive production of sweet potato for bioethanol in the rural community of Fanaye. The local population and other civil society actors organized several protests against the project in Fanaye, including a demonstration along the local highway and several petitions to state officials and the president.⁸ Shortly before the presidential elections in 2012, a violent confrontation took place during a meeting of the rural council that left two people dead. There upon the Senegalese president, Abdoulaye Wade, decided to abandon the project in Fanaye and move it to the wetland reserve of Ndiaël.⁹

Wade was able to grant the company a new project site without consulting the rural council or the rural population since the project area is part of a nature reserve and therefore directly managed by the government. In order to provide the land to Senhuile-Senethanol, President Wade downgraded it through decree 2012/366 from its status as a nature reserve and leased it for a period of 50 years directly to the company. The decree has not been made public, and it is unclear whether the land is now part of the public or private domain.¹⁰ To legitimize this act, the state actively resorted to a discourse of "idle" land. A map produced by state technicians before the start of the project confirmed the existence of only six villages in the zone. Civil society actors opposed to the project, however, claim that 37 villages are located within the project area.¹¹ This shows that far from being an objective term, "idle" land is a contested construction that is used to legitimize large-scale agribusiness projects.

When the new president, Macky Sall, came into office in March 2012, he initially abandoned the project; however, he reinstated it in July 2012, but ordered an inclusive consultation process before the relaunch. On August 9, 2012, the project developers from Senhuile-Senethanol invited representatives of Ndiaël's local population to the Radisson Hotel, one of Dakar's most expensive Hotels, to negotiate a compromise. The Radisson compromise would have confined the plantation to 10,000 hectares in the outer buffer area of the Ndiaël reserve. The exact location was to be identified in agreement with the local population.¹² However, three days before the compromise was signed on August 6, 2012, the president issued a new decree permitting the project to continue in its initial boundaries. Senhuile-Senethanol has started clearing the land in Ndiaël and is now planning to plant sunflower seeds for oil production. The 37 villages located inside the project area do not face eviction; but they have been enclosed within 500 meters of land. That makes the villagers' main economic activity – traditional stock farming – impossible since this form of farming requires large plots of land.¹³ Until now, the state has secured Senhu-

ile-Senethanol access to and control of the land. Since the company started working the land, police forces have permanently patrolled the project area to prevent acts of sabotage and clashes between plantation workers and inhabitants of the villages inside the project area.¹⁴

RESISTING THE LAND GRAB

Since its beginning, the Senhuile-Senethanol project has been highly contested in Senegal. Parts of the local population that lives in the three rural communities affected by the project – Ngith, Ronkh and Diama – as well as several civil society organizations have been involved in the struggle using a variety of strategies. In particular, young people living in the villages inside the area leased by Senhuile-Senethanol have engaged in temporally and spatially limited acts of resistance at the project site. When the first tractors arrived in 2012 to clear the land local people barricaded the roads, and the police force intervened. Since then several confrontations have taken place between residents of the area, Senhuile-Senethanol workers and the police.¹⁵ Several protestors are still in prison. Members of civil society organizations that support the protesters also report that company machines and materials have been burned at the project site. Beyond these confrontational acts of resistance, the inhabitants of the 37 villages inside the project area have established the Collective for the Defense of the Ndiaël Reserve (Collective) to voice their concerns and lobby to abandon the project. They have benefited from the experiences of the population in Fanaye who also founded a collective for the defense of their land. The land grab in Fanaye was successfully prevented.

The first action of the Ndiaël Reserve Collective was to organize a gathering of the inhabitants affected by the project to inform them about the Senhuile-Senethanol project. One important activity undertaken by the Collective has been gathering and disseminating information on current developments around the Senhuile-Senethanol plantation and the dangers connected with the project. Large-scale land deals are often criticized because much information concerning the conditions of the deals and even the details of the main investors remain obscure. Contracts signed between governments and investors are not usually made public, and this is the case with the Senhuile-Senethanol project.

The Collective also addressed a plea to the national government to abandon the project. Until now, the Collective has not staged marches or protests. This is partly due to the fact that the land grab is taking place in a remote area. Consequently, marches can only be seen if journalists are willing to travel to the project site or if the protestors move their march to one of the bigger cities in the area. Both options require financial and logistical resources that the Collective does not have. When the project started in 2012, not everyone in the three rural communities affected by the Senhuile-Senethanol plantation was opposed to the project. Local communities are far from being homogenous entities. People are affected in very different ways by land grabbing due to the economic, political, social and cultural conditions in which they live. At the same time, people interpret and perceive land grabs according to their interests, identities and aspirations; consequently, they react in different ways to land grabs.¹⁶ In the case of Ndiaël, the population was especially divided between stock herders and agriculturalists. As the agricultural land is situated outside of the wetland reserve, the farmers are not directly affected by the loss of

land. They hoped to profit from employment opportunities as well as from the investments in social infrastructure that the company had promised. The stock herders, in contrast, will lose their pastures, and thus their means of livelihood are directly threatened by the project. Therefore, only parts of the population started organizing and mobilizing against the land grab as part of the Collective. The Collective's spokesperson, Ardo Sow, reports that it is only since the summer of 2014 that agriculturalists and pastoralists have been united in the struggle against the land grab. This unity developed after it became clear that Senhuile-Senethanol would not employ the amount of people it had initially promised.¹⁷

Shortly after its establishment, the Collective reached out to the Cadre de réflexion et d'action sur le foncier au Sénégal (CRAFS). CRAFS is an alliance of around 20 civil society organizations working on land issues, and includes the national peasant association Conseil National de Concertation et de Coopération des Ruraux (CNCR). CRAFS is attempting to persuade the Senegalese government to start a process of participative land reform that takes into account the interests of smallholder peasants. CRAFS has also created a support system for rural populations affected by land grabbing. The member organizations of CRAFS and the Collective organized a media campaign denouncing the land grab in Ndiaël, and engaged in lobby activities against the project by meeting several state officials involved in the project.

As the activities of CRAFS show, the struggle against land grabbing is closely linked to a broader struggle over the general direction of agricultural policies in Senegal. The CNCR as well as ENDA PRONAT, one of the most influential NGOs involved in the struggle against land grabbing in Senegal, link their activities against the land grab in Ndiaël closely to their struggle for participative land reform that acknowledges the interests of smallholders and benefits family agriculture.

To justify their struggle, CRAFS and the Collective especially stress the social injustice of the land grab and the loss of livelihoods for the inhabitants of the 37 villages inside the project area. Since the local population does not have any official land titles to the area inside the Ndiaël reserve, these organizations argue that the stock herders at least hold a customary right to these lands. As Ardo Sow explains: "There are 37 villages that only do stock farming and who see that their land is being taken away, that is unjust. They've lived and worked there for decades. Then from one day to the other you tell them to leave their land? That's difficult. Especially since they have asked several times to obtain some land in the forest to engage in agro-pastoral activities but their demands have always been refused [...] and then you see a foreign company arriving with its machines and everything and getting 20.000 hectares".¹⁸

While Senhuile-Senethanol is certainly a target of the resistance, the state is presented as mainly responsible for the land grab. Thus, the demands to abandon the project are mostly directed at the government of Macky Sall or government officials at the regional level. Beyond that, the organizations assembled in CRAFS frame their struggles differently. The CNCR for example stresses the lack of inclusion of the local communities in the planning of the Senhuile-Senethanol project.¹⁹ In contrast, ENDA PRONAT represents a more radical position: it is clearly opposed to any form of land grab and large-scale agro-industrial projects. This organization's vision of agro-ecological development is based on family agriculture, which, it argues, is incompatible with land grab-

bing. As Mariam Sow, the director of ENDA PRONAT, puts it: "if you put a catfish next to a caiman, the catfish will surely end up in the stomach of the caiman".²⁰ The struggle against land grabbing is firmly framed within the agricultural context. So far, the Collective and CRAFS have been unable to link the struggle to other contested political issues such as human rights or environmental concerns.

FROM LOCAL TO INTERNATIONAL ARENAS

Some NGOs organized in CRAFS together with the Collective shifted their protest against the land grab from the Senegalese national to the international arena by launching a campaign in Europe. NGOs such as ENDA PRONAT and ActionAid, which work in Senegal but also have sections or partners in other countries, managed to broaden the alliance against the land grab in Ndiaël and involve European civil society organizations such as *PeupleSolidaire*, *Re:Common*, *Grain* and the US-based research institution *Oakland Institute*. In order to encourage these actors to get involved, and to gain media attention in Europe, the alliance reframed their struggle and presented the land grab in Ndiaël as a case of exploitation by European capitalists who were threatening the food security of the local population in Senegal. The alliance organized press conferences and discussions in Europe and launched an online appeal that they directly addressed to the main investor of Senhuile-Senethanol, the Italian *Tampieri Financial group*.²¹ Thus, the alliance managed to direct their protests against a new target: the European main investor and the individuals behind the land deal. In their struggle against the land grab, ENDA PRONAT, ActionAid, the CNCR and the Collective, linked actors at the local, national and international level and with different access to networks of institutional, financial and political support. They shifted the conflict over the land grab in Ndiaël from a local to a national and international level. When the Senhuile-Senethanol project started out, its legitimacy and consequences had mainly been negotiated at the local level, it was not until CRAFS got involved that the struggle also took place at the national level. This led actions against the project to be addressed either towards the state or Senhuile-Senethanol. However, the capital holders behind Senhuile-Senethanol, who are based in Italy, had not been targeted until this point. Since the European campaign, the land grab in Ndiaël has been negotiated in Italy as well as in Senegal. The international campaign succeeded in making the international dynamics of the land grab and the responsible European actors visible; once they had become visible, they could also become the target of political claims. This strategy has not (yet) led to an abandonment of the project, however, but representatives of the *Tampieri Financial Group* have met with activists from ActionAid Italy and agreed to further consultations with the local population in Senegal. This strategy can be seen as a specific answer to the involvement of large-scale international capital in a land deal. When international capital has been involved, civil society actors and social movements struggling, for example, against environmental pollution or resource exploitation in the Global South have often engaged in so-called shaming campaigns. To target the often Western profiteers behind economic deals and projects, international civil society alliances have often shifted the scale of their actions by launching campaigns in Europe and the US (such as campaigns by the German NGO *Urgewald*).

Large-scale international capital is involved in many cases of land grabbing. Thus investors and decision makers

responsible for the land grab are disconnected from the local place of the land deal, where immediate political contestation usually first occurs. To target the individuals or companies responsible for the land grab it is therefore necessary to contest the land deal at the national and international level. This becomes possible since the global dynamics of land grabbing not only involve international large-scale capital, but also movements and NGOs around the globe that are sensitive towards the problem and willing to support a struggle against a local land grab and join an international campaign. Shifting struggles against land grabbing to the international level might be especially relevant for African movements and organizations. Most African countries are in a highly dependent position in the capitalist world system. Like many African states, Senegal is highly indebted and dependent on bilateral aid and loans from the World Bank and the IMF. As a reaction to the food crisis in 2008, foreign donors have become increasingly willing to grant agricultural loans. Yet, these programs usually come with many strings attached.²² One such program is the “New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition” that was launched at the G8 summit in July 2012. In return for agricultural aid in the framework of the New Alliance, African governments, including the Senegalese president, agreed to a set of policy measures on land that were designed to help companies and other private or institutional investors identify, negotiate for and acquire lands in key agricultural areas.

Thus, the Senegalese government only has limited room to maneuver when it comes to decisions on the general direction of agricultural development. As many Senegalese activists note, putting pressure on the state might not necessarily help, since the state lacks the competences to implement agricultural development based on smallholder production rather than big agribusinesses. Admittedly, these donor-induced policies tie in with the long-term agricultural orientation of the Senegalese state that has favored large scale commercial farming and industrial agriculture as the model for economic growth, rural development and food security since the late 1990s. Against this backdrop, the struggle against land grabbing in Senegal can therefore also be understood as a struggle against a regime of international land governance. Hence it also constitutes a struggle against neoliberal agricultural liberalization imposed through international institutions (such as the IWF) and international mechanisms (including the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition). These institutions and mechanisms support policies of opening up agricultural sectors to international investors, and land enclosure; and dictate a line of export-oriented agricultural development.

CONCLUSION

The case of Ndiaël shows that resistance against land grabbing does not always take the form of protests and demonstrations. Similarly, the main actors opposing a land grab are not always organized social movements. In Senegal, the main actors involved in the struggle are the national peasant federation CNCR, national NGOs that have joined forces as a coordinated network in CRAFS as well as certain groups among the local population organized as part of the Collective. These national actors have been joined and supported by NGOs and research institutions from the northern hemisphere.

Instead of staging protests, the people and organizations involved in the struggle against the Senhuile-Senethanol project used a variety of strategies: confrontational tactics, such as blocking roads as well as non-confrontational tactics

including lobbying on the local and national level, and media campaigns. By launching a European campaign, they transferred the conflict over the Senhuile-Senethanol project from the national to the international level. This enabled these groups to directly target the main investor behind the land deal in Ndiaël: the Italian Tampieri Financial Group.

In struggles against land grabbing, this latter strategy turns out to be particularly successful because large-scale international capital is often involved in land grabs. Thus, the main investors are often disconnected from the site of the land grab where the immediate conflict usually occurs. Furthermore, the state plays a highly ambivalent role in the politics of land. As in the case of Ndiaël, national governments often facilitate land grabs by granting land rights to investors and securing control over and access to the land, sometimes with the help of the police or military. Therefore, the government has to be one of the main targets in struggles against land grabs. At the same time, most African states are highly dependent on the capitalist world system. African governments do not always have the power to change the general orientation of their agricultural policies away from land grabs and agro-industrial growth. Thus, resistance to the current dynamics on land can be more successful when they (also) manage to bring their claims into the international arena.

Louisa Prause is a PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin. The subject of her thesis is “Global Dynamics-Local Conflict: Struggles over Land in West Africa”.

1 Borras, Saturnino M./Hall, Ruth/Scoones, Ian/White, Ben/Wolford, Wendy (2011): Towards a better understanding of global land grabbing: an editorial introduction. In: *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (2), 209–216. **2** Borras, Saturnino M./Franco, Jennifer C./ (2013): Global Land Grabbing and Political Reactions ‘From Below’. In: *Third World Quarterly* 34 (9), 1723–1747, p. 1725. **3** See for example, Edelman, Marc (2013): Messy hectares: questions about the epistemology of land grabbing data. In: *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40 (3), 485–501. **4** See for example, Mehta, Lyla/Veldwisch, Gert Jan/Franco, Jennifer (2012): Introduction to the Special Issue: Water Grabbing? Focus on the (Re)appropriation of Finite Water Resources. In: *Water Alternatives* 5 (2), 193–207. **5** See for example, Wolford, Wendy/Borras, Saturnino M./Hall, Ruth/Scoones, Ian/White, Ben (2013): Governing Global Land Deals: The Role of the State in the Rush for Land. In: *Development and Change* 44 (2), 189–210. **6** Bauriedl, Sybille/Wichterich, Christina (2014): Ökonomisierung von Natur, Raum, Körper. Feministische Perspektiven auf sozial-ökologische Transformationen. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (Analysen) (ed), p. 19. **7** The analysis combines the first results of an explorative field study conducted between June 20 and July 4, 2014 in Dakar. Special thanks for their support, time and invaluable information go to the team of ENDA PRONAT, Thierno Cissé, Ardo Sow, Zakaria Sambakhe, Bruno Sonko as well as the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung in Dakar. **8** Farmlandgrab: Sénégal : Reportage vidéo de la marche de Fanaye contre l'accaparement des terres, October 4 2011, <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/19382> (accessed July 22, 2014). **9** Word, Jettie (2014): Surrendering Our Future: Senhuile-Senethanol Plantation Destroys Local Communities and Jeopardizes Environment. Ed. by The Oakland Institute. http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OI_Report_Surrendering_Our_Future.pdf, (accessed July 1, 2014), p. 11. **10** Word: Surrendering Our Future, p. 12. **11** Word: Surrendering Our Future, p. 5. **12** Mémoire et Points de Négociation du Collectif des Villages Affectés par la Société Italienne Senhuile-Senethanol. Communauté Rurale de Ngnith. (2012). **13** Interview 1, Thierno Cissé, assistant coordinator CNCR, June, 24 2014, Dakar. **14** Interview 2, Focus Group Discussion Team Enda PRONAT, June, 26 2014, Dakar. **15** Interview 3, Ardo Sow, spokesperson of the Collective, July 3, 2014, Dakar. **16** Borras/Franco: Global Land Grabbing. **17** Interview 3. **18** Interview 3. **19** Interview 1. **20** Interview 3. **21** You can find the online appeal here: <http://www.peuples-solidaires.org/appelurgentsenegal/>. **22** Koopman, Jeanne (2012): Land grabs, government, peasant and civil society activism in the Senegal River Valley. In: *Review of African Political Economy* 39 (134), 655–664.

IMPRINT

POLICY PAPER is published by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung
Responsible: Henning Heine
Franz-Mehring-Platz 1 · 10243 Berlin, Germany · www.rosalux.de
ISSN 1867-3163 (Print), ISSN 1867-3171 (Internet)
Editorial deadline: October 2014
Proofreading: Simon Phillips, Berlin
Setting/Production: MediaService GmbH Druck und Kommunikation
Printed on Circleoffset Premium White, 100% recycled paper