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PARENA: Memorandum on land acquisitions in the Office du Niger

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PARENA | February 2011

(Translated from French by IIED)

National Renaissance Party

For a democratic, cohesive society

February 2011

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1- On 12 February 2011, the President of the Republic of Mali will travel to Kurumaari (Niono administrative district) to inaugurate the development work on 1700 of the 100,000 hectares granted to the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) in the Office du Niger area.

2- In seeking to secure foreign and national private investment in the rural sector, the Malian government has in recent years transferred hundreds of thousands of hectares in the Office du Niger scheme, with no guarantee to date that this policy of transferring farmland will help to achieve food self-sufficiency or ensure the food

sovereignty of our people. These transfers have aroused and still arouse deep concern amongst the communities settled in this region, some of whom are in danger of being evicted from land they have worked for several generations.

3- Mali is an agricultural country, more than 80% of whose active population is engaged in crop and livestock farming and fishing.

4- Set up in 1932 around the Markala dam, the Office du Niger scheme has the potential to irrigate more than one million hectares in the areas of Kala, Kurumaari, Ké-Macina, Méma, Farimaké, Karéri, Kokeri and Bewani.

5- The Office has a monopoly on management of this land to which the State holds title. A decree dated 1st July 1996 (No. 96-188/PRM) confirms the Office's control over not only developed land equipped for irrigation, also land in undeveloped areas, irrigated land and land that could be irrigated by the structures of the Markala dam (which is 816 metres long and was built between 1934 and 1947).

6- There are various land-use arrangements: annual contracts, farming permits, residential leases, ordinary leases and long leases.

7- Although the scheme has been in existence for 78 years, the total area of land under irrigation still hovers, despite the efforts of successive governments and partners, around the 88,000 ha mark despite its potential, as already stated, of over one million hectares.

8- After cotton, a crop largely abandoned in 1970, rice is the mainstay of farm production in the area. Vegetable crops and sugarcane have also been introduced. Developing 1 ha in the area costs between FCFA 3 and 4.5 million depending on the type of soil.

9- The Office du Niger scheme is unique in West Africa. It was intended to enable Mali to achieve food self-sufficiency and indeed export a surplus of farm produce. It is sad to have to admit that, for many reasons including the inadequate size of the majority of family farms, this objective has not been achieved. 54% of small farmers settled in the area are unable to meet their families' food needs throughout the year and the Office cannot produce enough to cover the consumption needs of the Malian population.

10- Despite its huge hydro-agricultural potential, Mali has difficulty in feeding its population, estimated in 2010 to number 15 million souls. Food self-sufficiency is still the goal but, in both good and bad years, we import hundreds of thousands of tons of rice.

11- In order to increase farm production, ensure food self-sufficiency and, if possible, export the surplus, the public authorities have been trying for several years to attract private investment to the Office du Niger area.

12- Since 2003, around fifty conventions have been signed with Malian or foreign companies or institutions in respect of around 800,000 ha of land. Many national and international companies are joining the rush for farmland in Mali.

Major acquisitions in the Office area include:

Huicoma (Mali), 100,000 ha

Malibya Agriculture (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya), 100,000 ha

UEMOA, 100,000 ha

AGROENER (Mali), 40,000 ha

MCA Project (USA), 22,441 ha

CAMEX (Brazil), 20,000 ha

Société Yatassaya (Mali), 20,000 ha

SOCOGEN (Mali), 20,000 ha

SNF (Mali), 15,000 ha

ILLOVO GROUP and SCHAFFER (South Africa and United Kingdom), 14,000 ha

PETROTECH (Mali), 10,000 ha

GDCM (Malian rice importer), 7,400 ha

13- Various foreign groups, including the multinational Lonrho and Saudi, Sudanese and Chinese investors, have obtained or are in the process of obtaining large tracts, some of them up to 50,000 ha in the case of the Saudis. Lonrho is said to have designs on 100,000 hectares.

14- A total of four hundred and seventy-two thousand hectares (472,000 ha) has already been transferred to foreign investors. National private individuals have been granted more than two hundred and thirty-three thousand

hectares (233,000 ha). According to our information, over twenty-six thousand hectares (26,000 ha) have been awarded to a dozen or so Malian individuals.

15- In addition, while some foreign investors are developing land with a view to settling Malian farmers (e.g. the Millennium Challenge Account), others are planning to work it directly, using local farm labour.

16- Many questions and sometimes feelings of indignation arise when studying the agreements, memoranda of understanding and leases through which hundreds of thousands of hectares of the nation's land assets have been transferred to the private sector.

17- The readiness with which farmland has been distributed is astounding. The impression is created that Mali's land is being given away, with virtually no precautions taken by the Malian signatories to the conventions.

18- On the occasion of the President's visit to the land allocated to UEMOA, the National Renaissance Party (PARENA) invites the Government to publish a full list of beneficiaries of land in the Office du Niger scheme and the areas granted to them.

19- Similarly, all enterprise agreements, letters of agreement, schedules of conditions and all their clauses should be made public without delay. The lack of clarity around land transfers in the Office du Niger area must be rectified.

20- The agreement between the State and Malibya Agriculture bears no date of signature. It is vague. If environmental and social impact studies have been conducted concerning this project, their findings must be made public. People need to know what impact the 40 km canal considered as "the biggest in Mali and one of the largest in Africa" will have on the rest of the Office's hydraulic system. How will this inland river (with a flow rate of 11 million m³ per day, 4 billion m³ per year) affect the floodplains of the central delta (especially Mopti, Yombarou and Tenenkou)? Where is the rice produced by Malibya Agriculture to go? The Malian market?

21- Furthermore, public opinion needs full information on the 100,000 ha allocated to UEMOA. Who will be the beneficiaries? Who will work the land?

22- The same demand for transparency applies to all private investors who are apparently not fulfilling their contractual obligations and some of whom seem to be engaging in speculation over land that does not belong to them.

23- PARENA is not opposed to private intervention in the rural sector in general or the Office du Niger scheme in particular. However, it feels that this needs to happen within an organized framework, supported by a revitalized, watchful State, which can create conditions for development whilst protecting the weak against arbitrary decisions.

24- PARENA recommends that the Government organize consultation and dialogue with all stakeholders: the management of the Office, representatives of the Syndicat des exploitants (Office du Niger farmers' union), the National Confederation of farmer organizations, representatives of national and foreign private investors and local and national elected representatives in the region.

Bamako, 7th February 2011

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