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(translated by Re:Common)

In Senegal, a clash on land leased from the government

By Emanuela Stella

The local population is opposed to the project. ActionAid [launches] petition against the Italian company Tampieri accused of land grabbing. The reply: "We operate according to the rules, in the interest of the people"

More than 24,000 signatures were collected in one week through an international petition launched by ActionAid and Re:Common to ask Tampieri Group, a food processing company that operates in Faenza, to withdraw from a project in the Senegalese reserve of Ndiel, around which there are about forty villages inhabited by local communities, to grow sunflowers for the production of edible oil. A delegation consisting of representatives from the villages of Northeast Senegal as well as NGOs is visiting various European countries to denounce the project, which endangers "the lives and livelihoods of 9,000 people." Senhuile SA, controlled by Italy's Tampieri for 51% and by the Senegalese joint venture Senethanol for the remaining 49%, was leased 20,000 hectares of the reserve in August 2012 by the Senegalese government: residents are lamenting many heavy impacts on their lifestyle, claiming that the project restricts access to grazing land for their cattle, to water sources and to other resources necessary for their subsistence.



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One-sixth of Senegal's farmland leased out to private sector. Between 2000 and 2012, the government granted 644,000 hectares of agricultural land, or 16.5 % of the country's arable area, to private companies, even though Senegal is not self-sufficient in food and 70% of its population lives from farming and pastoralism. The legality of agreements signed by the government with foreign entrepreneurs is questioned by the local people, who themselves do not hold official land titles but use land under customary law which is in force in the countryside and who consider themselves the rightful owners. Elhadji Samba Sow, representative of the collective of the villages of Ndiaël said: "Beside depriving us of the land, this project has a massive impact on the environment, linked to deforestation due to the cutting of trees and shrubs and the limitation of the movement of livestock. Not only that, but there are also difficulties of access to water, given that the pipes used in common cannot pass over the land seized by Sannuile. Moreover, there are planes flying over the whole area with products which may pose risks for human or animal health – we don't know."

A controversial project. Tampieri's project has been controversial from the beginning. In 2011, when it was located in Fanaye, clashes between supporters and opponents of the project caused the death of two people and the wounding of several others, prompting foreign investors to change the location. Many compensations were proposed, but not yet granted, to the villages of Ndiaël, which rejected fodder for animals, since this would make them dependent on external inputs, and refused the offer of jobs, considering that this would be a precarious employment, without a contract and with a modest daily pay. The fear is that foreign investors may suddenly decide to pull out, due to low profitability of the project, leaving the villagers with no means to work and no means of subsistence.

"It is not true that in Senegal there is land to be distributed," says Mariam Sow of ENDA Pronat (Environmental Development Action in the Third World, which helps rural communities to adopt sustainable agricultural practices). "The Senegalese government should consult farmers and peasants on how land is used. Africa went through dark periods, from slavery to colonisation until independence. In 2010 we made an evaluation, and it was catastrophic. I invite the President to carefully analyze this situation. It is true that he is managing to mobilize resources, but it's necessary to choose systems that provide security to rural communities."

"We operate in the interests of local people," says the company. "They want to drag us into a matter of land grabbing, but that does not concern us, since we did not steal land. In fact, we are doing something useful for the local population and for all of Senegal, helping them to produce the food they need," replies Giovanni Tampieri, CEO of the group. "For the moment, we only work for the Senegalese internal market: we did not export anything, except samples for quality control. Given the current needs of Senegal, we are starting to produce rice, the staple food of the country, which is forced to import 70% of its supply. Afterwards we will produce maize to feed livestock, also for the domestic market, because much of it is also being imported. Finally, we are starting to investigate the possibility of producing peanut seeds for the Senegalese farmers, as requested by the government: peanut is one of the main crops grown in Senegal." Tampieri assures that "When we get close to the villages we leave large areas available to the people, we provide them with emergency services, schools and places for worship, and we irrigate pasture areas to feed their cattle. It's not true that we preventing access to water: we tried to dig wells for the use of the people, but we ran into their opposition, as they are convinced that we should reduce our impact to a minimum." Tampieri states that no pesticides are being used in the area, only foliar fertilizers, and that "We have absolutely not deforested, as the areas assigned to us were arid."

"The fact that a majority of the local people is opposed to the project," says Roberto Sensi, Action Aid policy officer for the right to food, "highlights a conflict of interest on the use of the land where the private interest is prevailing over the collective. Moreover, risks posed to food security and the environment as reported by the Collective for the defense of the land of Ndiaël, an environmental and social impact assessment made only after the project had already started, the disappearance of a commitment made by the company with the Community in August 2012 to implement the project in an agreed area, are all elements that make this investment a land grabbing case, according to the terms of the Tirana Declaration, signed, among others, by the FAO."

An appeal to Tampieri to withdraw from the project. The Italian organisations ActionAid and the Common, together with Peuples Solidaires, GRAIN, Oakland Institute, the Conseil National de Concertation et de Coopération des Ruraux and ENDA Pronat, support the protest of the communities and have launch an urgent appeal to Tampieri to put an end to the project. The Italian company, for its part, strongly reaffirms its "strong desire to continue to operate according to the rules and in the common interest."

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