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Madagascar: Worse than the Daewoo project, the Agribusiness Strategy

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CRAAD-OI and TANY Collective | 29 April 2021 [[FR](#)]

MADAGASCAR: WORSE THAN THE DAEWOO PROJECT, THE NATIONAL AGRIBUSINESS STRATEGY

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SUMMARY

This article discusses three topics related to Malagasy land "earmarked for investment projects":

- 4 million hectares for agropole development, a new type of investment zone that is fashionable in Africa, are planned over the next 10 years according to the National Agribusiness Strategy.

- A draft framework law on so-called "special status lands" will probably be submitted by the government to the National Assembly for approval at the next parliamentary session.

- The 60,000 hectares made available to the UAE group Elite Agro LLC by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries in Bas-Mangoky.

Agropoles or agricultural growth poles are "a group of companies, located in a defined geographical area, that maintain functional relationships in their production, processing and marketing activities of animal, plant, fish or forest products". This is another form of Special Economic Zone (SEZ), a new trend promoted by African leaders that has led to the emergence of more than 30 growth poles covering more than 3.5 million hectares in 23 countries over the past 15 years. Research in Africa has shown that the effectiveness of these public-private partnerships for the fight against poverty and for food security goes unproven. The area planned by Malagasy officials is outrageous and unacceptable, more than three times the area coveted by the Daewoo project in 2008. Regardless of the surface area, we would suggest that instead of entrusting Malagasy agriculture to private actors, local businessmen and multinational corporations which often prefer to devote themselves to cash crops and exports, under the pretext of modernization, we should support peasants and family farms which provide work to all family members and can ensure food for all. We should also put more thought, effort, means, and pride in the success of actions that will benefit rural populations which constitute the majority of Malagasies.

The word "agropole" was not included in the text of the bill. But a presentation on agropoles was made during a workshop to finalize the bill on special status lands in Antsirabe in March 2020. The spirit, principles and procedures described in this bill have provoked protests from various entities, notably for the lack of involvement of grassroots communities and local authorities in decision-making and the cumbersome procedures and costs that will make it impossible to carry out local development projects on so-called "special status" lands. "The impact of the content of this future framework law on the development of the country in strategic sectors" and "the inevitable important consequences that the final version of this bill will have on the entire Malagasy population" led 40 civil society organizations to write to the government in May 2020 to express their wish to broaden the consultation to include local communities and actors directly concerned by the different types of land in the different regions. The refusal to hold regional consultations and to disseminate the current version of the bill on special status lands raises concerns that no major changes have been made following the e-mail consultations conducted by the National Land Fund. Inter-regional consultations are planned for a draft law on community land domains. The greatest vigilance is thus needed by all citizens, above all by deputies and senators who will engage their responsibility during the examination and vote of the bill on special status lands, which will trigger a series of other laws and crucial measures.

On 7 April 2021, the Council of Ministers approved the establishment of an interministerial task force to organize and coordinate the setting up of the 60,000 ha made available by the Malagasy State to the Emirati group Elite Agro LLC in the Menabe region. Various requests for clarification on this project are addressed to the national authorities, in particular: will this project benefit from hydro-agricultural infrastructures financed by loans from the African Development Bank that generations of Malagasy will have to repay? While reiterating our rejection of the project, we propose that Malagasy peasants be prioritised in the allocation of land in the Bas-Mangoky, on the right bank as well as



on the left bank, in particular migrants coming from the South who are fleeing from drought. They should be installed on these lands, with accompanying measures to be determined through their own participation in dialogues and decisions.

Introduction

The organizations that are signatories to this article regularly communicate on public policy orientations of current Malagasy leaders in the field of land and agriculture. This monitoring work continues with this publication, which reveals a relentless strategy, a contested bill and a specific case that is unfolding.

A national agribusiness strategy, which has already been the subject of a validation meeting for its implementation in July 2020, aims to develop 4 million hectares of agropoles. We will see what the concept of agropoles consists of. There are already numerous examples in Africa.

In addition, a bill on special status lands is likely to be submitted to Parliament in the upcoming May session. The 2020 version of this bill was discussed between the competent authorities and Malagasy civil society organizations. While the main elements of that discussion are presented here, it is feared that the failure to release the final version of the bill means that the most contested points have not been modified. This article will focus on land for investment zones.

Finally, the controversial project to lend 60,000 hectares of land to the Emirati group Elite Agro LLC has raised many questions and reflections. Proposals more favorable to the majority of the Malagasy population are essential.

The objective of this publication is to alert elected officials and share with citizens the knowledge we have of this strategy, with its bills and land transactions more or less hidden from view. We hope that debates are still possible and can change the orientation and priorities of decision-makers, as these documents and projects are high contestable.

I - Four million hectares of agropoles for agribusiness announced in the National Agribusiness Strategy.

In September 2019, the national press discreetly reported on the development of a national agribusiness strategy in Madagascar (1). However, on July 15, 2020, a workshop validated its implementation, as we had mentioned in an article dated February 22, 2021 entitled "L'Agrégation Agricole dans la Stratégie Nationale de l'Agribusiness à Madagascar" (2)

We hoped in vain that government officials would inform the public in the following weeks. It is our duty to divulge an extremely serious fact from the National Agribusiness Strategy of July 2020, according to which "4 million hectares of developed, viable agropoles with clear management organization" are planned for the next 10 years (3). This huge area is three times the area involved in the 2008 Daewoo Logistics project. It exceeds the total area cultivated by Malagasy farmers on the whole island, which is absolutely unacceptable when we know that investors will be more interested in cash crops or other export crops than in foodstuffs for the Malagasy population.

"Agropoles or agricultural growth poles are defined as a group of companies, circumscribed in a given geographical area, which maintain functional relationships in their production, processing and marketing activities of a given animal, plant, fishery or forest product" of which several dozen already exist in Africa. The African Development Bank is one of the international institutions promoting this model. Their objectives are

- to grant the exploitation and development of geographical areas favorable to the production of an agricultural, livestock or fishing product to companies that would ensure the production, processing and marketing of this commodity, by directing and coordinating all the actors and services related to the development of this "value chain"
- in order to produce wealth, employment and meet the needs of the markets" (4)

One of the modes of operation often advocated and used is contract agriculture, already described and analyzed in our previous publication (2).

"According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), which advises governments and parliamentarians on how to attract responsible agricultural investment to achieve sustainable development (.) "Africa has seen the emergence of 36 agricultural growth poles [...] over the past 15 years. They cover at least 3.5 million hectares of land in 23 countries [...]. Agropoles - also called agricultural growth poles - represent a new trend in Africa's agricultural development strategy. "[...] In 2014, African heads of state committed to eradicating hunger and rural poverty through a transformation of African agriculture, including a call for a transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture. A number of African governments see these hubs and growth corridors as a way to attract private investment to promote agricultural transformation. Agropoles are thus part of the range of tools to promote agribusiness investment development, such as Special Economic Zones (SEZs), that African leaders are experimenting with to unlock Africa's agricultural potential. They "are also seen as a way to counter the negative impacts and (bad) publicity that have resulted from the leasing of vast tracts of agricultural land to investors, commonly referred to as 'land grabbing'."(5) But the effectiveness of these public-private partnerships for poverty alleviation and food security goes unproven. (6)

This approach is based on the urgency of producing more, investing more and "modernizing" rather than producing better, producing differently and better distributing and protecting food. According to its promoters, it is essential to facilitate the massive entry into the agricultural sector of large non-farming private actors: entrepreneurs, domestic businesses, multinational corporations or foreign investors. The underlying belief is that small-scale producers cannot meet the challenge of feeding African countries, even though they already provide the vast majority of the food available on the continent (6) and are far more productive (8).

The conclusion of a study carried out by several NGOs highlights various problems encountered with agropoles, of which we will quote only this paragraph: "The primary beneficiaries of agricultural growth poles are the production, processing and marketing companies that are targeted by the various incentives that the poles concentrate. Small-scale producers are destined to be displaced to free up land for investors, trained to become employees on plantations, mega-farms or in the firms' factories, or contracted to supply agricultural materials to agribusinesses from the - usually minimal - share of developed land that goes to family farmers. Agricultural growth poles thus accumulate the same risks of exposure of workers and producers to the dictates of agribusinesses controlling international supply chains and of unfair competition against family farmers for access to land, finance and incentives or subsidies as large-scale irrigation, contracting and value chain development, large-scale land acquisition and plantation projects, especially for women. " (6)

Agropoles studied by researchers have led to numerous problems. Examples include :

- Béliér in Côte d'Ivoire (7), with the Yaanovel joint venture, which "raises the question of the concentration of the sector and the sustainability of PPPs" (public-private partnerships)
- Bagrépole in Burkina Faso (7)(9), where "hopes for the contribution of agribusinessmen remain frustrated by delays and blockages".

The results of these experiences reinforce the conviction that the benefits do not compensate for the losses, neither for the State nor for the population, and that it is urgent not to take such costly risks.

Neither the National Agribusiness Strategy with its 4 million hectares, nor the Plan Emergence de Madagascar (January 2021 version), which contains damning data on the priority given to investors on Malagasy land, have been officially published. We hope that the postponement of the public release of these state policy documents reflects the development of controversy and discussion behind the scenes in high places about the excessive and dangerous allocation of land to investors. Indeed, we hope that among those in charge at different levels of state institutions and structures there are people who are more aware and concerned than others about the need to preserve Malagasy land, to prioritize peasants and family farms in land and agricultural policies, and to give more means, efforts and reasons for pride in the success of actions that have a positive impact on the majority of the population. This is the opposite of the so-called modern and brilliant actions that benefit a few but hide the misery and the degradation of the living conditions of the majority of the population and cause the extension of famine.

These agropoles are not mentioned at all in the draft framework law on special status lands, yet they were the subject of a presentation during a workshop to finalize this bill in Antsirabe in March 2020.

The tendency of Malagasy leaders to facilitate the acquisition of zones dedicated to investments by national or foreign investors was one of the subjects of controversy between the government and civil society organizations,

between March and May 2020, during exchanges on the draft law on special status lands that could be submitted by the government at the next parliamentary session in May 2021.

II - The draft framework law on special status lands

The land included in areas subject to specific legal regimes, which for ease are referred to as special status lands, is the fifth category of land status defined by the 2005 land reform after public and private State domains and titled and untitled private property. It is composed of several types of land,

"land constituting zones reserved for investment projects, (but also)

- land that falls within the scope of the legislation on protected areas;
- land that serves as a support for the implementation of agreements signed under legislation on natural resource management;
- land that is legally defined as falling under the application of forestry law;
- land that is constituted as a protected area in application of an international convention ratified by the Republic of Madagascar" (law 2005-019 art.38)

At the end of this workshop, which was attended by several representatives of State structures and representatives of civil society organizations (10), a version (March 2020) of the draft law on land with specific status was circulated by the National Land Fund on 23 March 2020 to gather the final comments of the recipients.

Additional types of land were added in this version of the bill from the list in the 2005 law:

- "community domains ;
- community-managed lands ;
- land reserves. "

Comments and exchanges with the government on the framework bill in 2020

On March 27, the TANY Collective, which has been sent the draft law, responded to the National Land Fund to express its "profound disagreement with the entire bill" because according to the proposed text

- Only the sectoral ministry and the ministry in charge of land tenure decide on how special status lands will be used. Neither the land owners, nor local municipalities, nor elected officials and actors, nor local communities were expected to be involved in how special status lands would be used, created and managed if the proposal did not come from them.
- The titled private properties and the untitled private properties (transformed and) included in the specific areas would be demarcated in the name of the State and would no longer be recoverable by their owners and occupants. The latter would no longer be owners but would at best be managers subject to specifications drawn up without their participation and would no longer have the right to pass on to their children or to sell.
- The small forests currently managed by VOIs (grassroots communities) seemed to disappear and would henceforth be managed under this law.
- Local communities and their organisations cannot afford to undertake the procedures planned by the government, neither for local development areas nor for collective pasture lands and lands intended for receiving young farmers.
- In the end, the areas subject to legal regimes included in this bill, notably the emergence zones intended for investments, will benefit from "specific protection" to the detriment of customary use and family or lineage possession.
- The "redistribution of land" referred to in the penultimate paragraph of the Explanatory Memorandum will therefore ultimately be made in favor of operators able to finance the procedures (and therefore probably only to large-scale investors) to the detriment of current owners, occupants and users.

Given that the large-scale investors that the leaders and decision-makers are looking for through these measures are foreign investors, crucial questions arise

- concerning the free access of Malagasy citizens to each of the specific zones defined by this bill,
- on the capacity of the State to conduct services such as tax collection and customs procedures, running institutions like BIANCO, the national police force, the national gendarmerie, labour inspection, etc... which are needed to exercise national sovereignty on these lands (criticism already formulated towards the law on the Special Economic Zones),
- on the adoption of principles of transparency and accountability in the texts as well as in practice concerning all these lands benefitting from "specific protections"

The TANY Collective had requested the dissemination of this bill to the general public in order to allow clear and accessible information to all citizens and a debate including all the concerned actors (mayors, grassroots communities, private sector, local actors and jurists working in the sectors of environment, forests, etc.) of all the regions, before its presentation to the National Assembly. Then a group of 6 civil society organizations (CSOs) sent a letter to the government, supporting the request for consultation and debate before the bill on specific status lands is sent to the Assembly.

The Minister of Land Management replied on April 6 that "[...] the process for the elaboration of this bill began in 2005, [...] the Civil Society Platform has been represented in the CRTF (Committee for the Revision of Land Tenure Laws) since 2011, and many representatives of civil society participated in the workshop devoted to the elaboration of the said bill. [...] As the lockdown period did not prevent you from consulting each other to formulate a common request for postponement of the decision making on the bill in question, the Administration believes that this period should be used to deepen the reflections on this text and express your observations and comments. After the submission of this bill to the Commission on Business Law Reform, a final feedback workshop will be scheduled. For your information, a program for the acquisition of orthoimages with national coverage is currently being prepared by the MATP in collaboration with technical and financial partners in order to solve the problems related to the delimitation of land status in Madagascar, including special status lands, and to reduce the cost of land registration. " (11)

On May 22, 2020, 40 CSOs signed a communiqué calling for the organization of regional consultations (12) (13). As a result, the bill was not submitted to the May 2020 parliamentary session. The National Land Fund has continued to hold consultations by email with actors from different sectors (agriculture, industry, trade, mining, environment, civil society, tourism) instead of the requested consultations.

The evolution of the situation in 2021

The draft law, probably in a new version, has been validated by the Commission on Business Law Reform. In addition, a capitalization workshop on community land domains - which have therefore been excluded from the special status lands and will be the subject of another bill - was held in Antsirabe in March 2021. The bill on special status lands will probably be submitted to Parliament during the May 2021 session.

The TANY Collective sent a letter to the Minister of Land Management on April 6, 2021, highlighting the above points and asking him to share the current version of the draft law on special status lands with the civil society organizations that signed the May 22, 2020 communiqué. (14)

As this email has not been answered, we would like to share with all Malagasy citizens, and in particular with the parliamentarians who will be called upon to express themselves on this bill, the reasons for our concerns as of the March 2020 version (15), because the refusal of the executive authorities to show transparency on the "2021" version of this bill on special status lands makes us pessimistic with regard to a possible modification of the spirit of the law in the direction of the interests of the majority of the Malagasy people from all the regions and with limited financial means.

The vigilance of the deputies and senators is particularly solicited given the various votes on laws and ratifications of agreements that will be required of them during the coming session

- because the future framework law on special status lands will generate numerous new regulations and consequences in several strategic sectors,

- More than ever, the decision of parliamentarians will have a huge impact on access to land and the possibility of development for the rural Malagasy population, which makes up three-quarters of the population, and in particular the peasants who currently produce the majority of the food consumed in Madagascar.
- A major expansion of special status lands under the principles contested in 2020 could destroy the meaning of "community land".
- It is ultimately the future of the entire Malagasy nation and future generations on their land that is at stake.

These considerations regarding the National Agribusiness Strategy and the dangers of the bill are not part of a fiction nor are they possibilities that may arise in the long term. A concrete case of the allocation of a very large area of land to foreign investors has already become a reality in Madagascar.

III - The project of the Emirati group Elite Agro LLC is back on the table

In February 2020, the Malagasy Minister of Agriculture issued a communiqué announcing the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) concerning the "provision" of 60,000 ha of land in the Bas-Mangoky in southwestern Madagascar to the Emirati group Elite Agro LLC, in the form of a loan (16). In an initial communiqué denouncing this project, we highlighted various contradictions in the statements of senior officials, particularly concerning the existence or not of inhabitants and communities living in the area concerned (16). Despite requests, the government has not disclosed to all citizens the content of the MoU signed in 2020.

After more than a year of silence from decision-makers on this project contested by several citizens in Madagascar, the Council of Ministers of April 7, 2021 set up a "task force" (working group) involving several ministries to coordinate and organize the realization of this project by the Elite Agro group (17).

The main change noted in the minutes of the Council of Ministers concerns the destination of the crops: "70% of the foodstuffs that the company will produce will be sold at a low price on the local market and 30% will be offered free of charge to the Malagasy State" (17). The previous year we were told that "all production would be purchased by the Malagasy State at a low price, in accordance with the agreement between the two parties, to supply the local market in order to achieve food self-sufficiency and export"(18).

These changes could be due to a change in the terms of the MoU or the contract with the Elite Agro Group. Either way, the latest signed document must be released to the general public.

The establishment of this task force raises many questions:

- Is it a masquerade to show government control, given the criticism of its loss of sovereignty?
- Or is it an attempt to dilute the responsibility for this new Daewoo-like affair, which is a large-scale bargain sell-off of the country, among several ministries?
- Does the presence of the Ministry of Trade and Industry in the task force mean that new clauses in the MoU do not limit the group's activities to agricultural production, but extend them to the processing of certain commodities?
- Is the collaboration of the Ministry of Transport, Tourism and Meteorology motivated by plans to build an airfield and/or a port within the "loaned" area?
- The location of the Elite Agro LLC project on the right bank of the Mangoky River, which was known as early as January 2020, is confirmed by the minutes of the Government Council of 7 April 2021 (19). The lack of public information on the start of development on the right bank during the year, combined with the involvement of the Ministry of Water in the task force, raises a major question: Would it be possible that the Emirati company does not build new infrastructure for the project on the vast area made available to it by the Malagasy State, but intends to take advantage of the hydro-agricultural infrastructure on the left bank financed by several loans from the African Development Fund and OPEC via the African Development Bank of several tens of millions of dollars (20) that generations of Malagasy people will repay? This would be absolutely scandalous.

Intensive agribusiness cultivation will have dramatic consequences for the entire ecosystem of the region. They will severely reduce the water resources of nearby communities and farms and impact the water tables, as has already been observed in Morocco.(21)

- Is the statement in the ministerial communiqué of January 15, 2020 that "the group will take charge of all the necessary equipment and logistics" still valid?

Elite Agro is neither a humanitarian organization nor a small company in need of a "land loan". It is a powerful agribusiness conglomerate looking for land to cultivate all over the world - in Africa (22), Asia (23) and Europe (24) - in order to make a profit and sometimes to export food back to the Middle East. We have already reported that the Serbian public has questions about how this group and other Emirati actors have acted to become the largest landowners in Serbia (25). When its objective is to transfer skills to the inhabitants of the country that grants it land to cultivate, it happens that this group signs a clear and explicit memorandum of understanding on the subject with the objective of transferring skills to the inhabitants of the country that grants it land to cultivate, as in Algeria (26). If the Malagasy side does not have such a memorandum of understanding, it should neither expect a transfer of skills from the Emirati group, nor raise the subject in the vain hope of making the Malagasy population swallow the bitter pill.

Instead of lending large areas of land to a powerful Emirati group, the government should increase the amount of land cultivated by the Malagasy people.

- Recent reports indicate that the planned distribution of land on the left bank of the Mangoky River has stalled due to there being too many applicants: while 3,000 to 5,000 applications to receive 2.5 hectares were expected (27), 15,000 applications were reportedly received. So the area allocated to each household was reduced to 1 hectare (28).
- In addition, the thousands of climate migrants who had to leave their ancestral lands in the South due to drought during 2019 and 2020 (29) to seek livelihoods in other regions with better water resources, should, among other things, benefit from these lands. The organization of solid training and support over a fairly long period of time will obviously be necessary to enable them to learn new ways of working and adapt to the different living conditions.
- The search for different ways to allocate land to farmers who no longer have enough land to produce the food needed for family subsistence and development, as well as to the many landless Malagasies (30), should be the subject of serious work involving multiple actors and especially the local communities of the different regions. This sustainable development project for rural Malagasy populations, who constitute the majority of the country's people, would be well worth the establishment of an interministerial task force to coordinate the installation of new Malagasy farmers on the left and right banks of the Bas-Mangoky.

But the leaders' political will and choices have led them for the time being to start allocating crumbs of land to the Malagasies through green titles (31) within the framework of a pilot project in Vakinankaratra, which would benefit 22,000 households by 2023 in the best of cases, while gigantic areas are made available to foreign groups to develop agribusiness.

Conclusion

The specific case of the Elite Agro LLC project has been presented in this document at the same time as the draft framework law on special status land and the huge 4 million hectare agropole program because of the proximity in time of the announcement of the establishment of the task force for this project in Bas-Mangoky and the imminence of the first parliamentary session. The information available to the general public does not confirm whether the implementation and procedures followed in the context of the Elite Agro project will comply with the recommendations of the framework law on land with special status and will meet the criteria for agropoles.

Beyond the lack of transparency, what they have in common is the priority given to investors over farmers and the majority of Malagasy citizens. These choices and decisions are shared by successive leaders who have not proven their effectiveness and who will end up rejecting, sooner or later, the grassroots communities and citizens in view of the realities and consequences.

Sustainable development that provides work, livelihood, and land for decent income-generating activities for the majority of families and all their members in the 22 regions of Madagascar should be the subject of truly participatory, inclusive and democratic reflection and consultation in the current particularly difficult period.

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Centre de Recherches et d'Appui pour les Alternatives de Développement - Océan Indien (CRAAD-OI)
craad.madagascar@gmail.com ; <http://craadoi-mada.com>

Collectif pour la défense des terres malgaches – TANY ; Collective for the defense of Malagasy Lands - TANY
patrimoine.malgache@yahoo.fr ; <http://terresmalgaches.info>; www.facebook.com/TANYterresmalgaches

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