A Planet for Life 2012 focuses on agriculture and its relation to development, food and the environment. At the end of the 2000s, a consensus has emerged and points to the urgent need for massive investment in the agricultural sector, which is (once again) viewed as one of the prime engines for development and food security, as well as for poverty reduction. But what exactly does this consensus cover? While the idea of investing in agriculture is gaining ground and although several countries or regions appear to be offering opportunities for investment in agricultural land, debates are going on as to which agricultural models to choose and how agricultural policies should be implemented.

A Planet for Life called on many highly specialized authors from different countries and perspectives, and invites the reader to discover the sector in all its complexity, upstream and downstream of agricultural production. At the crossroads of the challenges posed by development, food security and the environment, the transformation of the agricultural sector is at the heart of the global stakes of sustainable development. To help steer these changes towards greater sustainability, this book makes us aware of how crucial it is to also change our representations of agriculture, change the visions that guide projects for change and the policies regulating this sector.

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R einvesting in agriculture, doubling its production, and making the production accessible are all facets of the current consensus to ensure food security for nine billion people in 2050. This consensus, however, does not provide answers to the following questions: Which investments should be prioritised? Which farm types should be encouraged (small, large, family or managerial)? How should agriculture be developed to achieve food security and to respond to the current environmental, political and social challenges?

Since a 2008 report from GRAIN (an NGO supporting small farmers), and the announcement from the Korean company Daewoo Logistics of their appropriation of 1.7 million hectares in Madagascar, land grabbing by foreign investors in Southern countries has been a hot topic in the media. The issue has motivated various initiatives that have produced numerous publications to record this trend, and has led to the emergence of consensual principles to regulate these practices: the acknowledgement of rights, the safeguarding of family farming and the encouragement of investor responsibility. Some advocacy NGOs consider that these statements of principles are insufficient and impractical, with Oxfam even calling for a moratorium. In fact, several Southern countries make major agricultural land resources available to investors, with low or even no costs, in the hope of boosting production, modernizing agriculture and ensuring food security (Figure 1). Smallholder and civil societies are rightly concerned by these initiatives, which seem to privilege “big investors” (private, national and/or foreign), but not family farms.

How do these asymmetrical positions and interests manifest themselves, in the particular case of the Office du Niger (ON)? Due to the desirability of the region of irrigable land in the interior delta of the Niger River, Mali is often cited in regards to the subject of land grabbing, as is also the case for Sudan and Madagascar. Located in the heart of Mali, in the dead delta of the Niger River in the south Sahelian zone, the ON zone extends over more than two million hectares, and is one of the oldest hydro agricultural development projects in West Africa, initiated in 1932 by the French engineer Emile Béime. It today consists of aging infrastructure that is spread across an area of 100,000 ha of irrigated land, which is allocated to 35,000 family farms. According to the 2008 Master Plan for the development of the ON zone (SDDZON), an additional 200,000 ha could be irrigated by means of costly investments (€6,000 to €10,000 per hectare) for smallholder rice farming, but there are insufficient public resources to realize

1. World Bank, FAO, IFAD, EU, Bilateral cooperation, NGOs, think tanks
2. 55,000 ha developed in 1950
3. 420,000 people live here, on farms of 2 to 3 ha that utilize few tools. They pay a €100/ha/year fee to the ON.
this plan. Beyond the potential offered by this land, both the developed and undeveloped areas, the rest of the ON zone is owned by the nation and governed by customary rules, despite the decree that entrusts its management to the ON. These areas are predominantly used for pastoral farming (nomadic herders), along with small-scale agriculture (millet/sorghum in rainfed culture) and fisheries.

Mali justifies the use of new sources and modes of financing (private investors, sovereign wealth funds) to enable the production of cereals, oilseeds and biofuels for the domestic market. In recent years, different types of private initiatives and sovereign funds have placed demands on an area of nearly 800,000 ha in the ON zone (i.e. eight to ten times greater than the area developed since the 1930s), and been granted provisional allocations.

Who are the beneficiaries? According to the ON, the 800,000 ha that have been subject to allocation requests are divided between private national interests and foreign investors (400,000 ha each). The demands made by national private interests (90%) are for small areas (38% of applicants request between one to five ha), while around ten of them demand areas larger than 500 ha. Foreign investors (who request between 500 to 100,000 ha) include sovereign wealth funds, parapublic companies (MALIBYA*), Chinese companies, bilateral and regional institutions, sugar agro-industries such as SOSUMAR, etc. The Malian government is responsible for and/or participates in Malibya and Sosumar projects, theoretically keeping a certain amount of control over the situation. The lack of transparency in these major land allocations is a cause of aggravation in the national debate on land tenure. Farmer organizations and the civil society, that have become very involved in the subject, organized an international conference (“Stop the land grab”) in Nyeleni (Sélingué) in November 2011, with the help of, among others, Via Campesina.

But how advanced is the actual development? To move from a provisional allocation to a lease (an ordinary one of 30 years or an emphyteutic lease of 50 years), private developers are required to submit studies of feasibility and environmental and social impacts, and a financing plan. At the present time, almost 250,000 ha have been leased to major national and foreign private companies that were able to conduct the required studies and provide operational financing plans.

National investors have been less successful, finding it difficult to gain access to water and finance. Thus, a significant proportion of potential beneficiaries are unable to obtain a lease: over the past year, the ON has cancelled 200,000 ha of provisional allocations, particularly those to small national private companies. In each instance, there are disputes that occur at the start of the process, which can escalate, between investors and the current land occupants or users who recognize a different legitimacy regarding their custodianship of the land.

FAMILY FARMS AND PRIVATE INVESTORS: DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES

The land tenure situation thus created is characterized by conflictual bipolarization. At one end of the scale are family farms situated on small state-developed irrigated sites, to whom have been granted either annual contracts (revocable on non-payment of the €100/ha/year fee) or exploitation permits without legal validity; the production costs for these farms curtail their ability to develop or invest. On the other side are new investors who have access to land and water, through state contracts or through leases with a legal validity granted by the ON, who must ensure the delivery of final developments and pay a €3/ha contribution to the maintenance of the primary water network. This system seems to function as if the status of potential investors opens up a whole range of possibilities to those that can mobilize the necessary finance for development (€8000/ha on average), possibilities that are closed to family farms who are confined to a poor/“recipient” status, which disqualifies them in advance from being recognized as potential “private” investors.

In this region of Mali, land value is measured in terms of the water that it can expect to receive. In the absence of adequate data, land allocated by the ON or the state is not made according to water availability. In this context, it is likely that the dry season will see the emergence of a new dividing line in relation to

4. A Libyan company that was allocated 100,000 ha. The content of the agreement between Mali and Malibya is not known.
access to water resources, there will be those that are “first served” (situated at the head of the network, such as the sugar industries and major water users), those with contracts stipulating a preferential water supply, and then the family farms that are located at the end of the network. For 70 years, the ON’s public regulation capacity and its specific skills as a manager of water and land on behalf of the state, has remained the system in place that determines the fate of the area, both in terms of development and for the prevention of potential social conflicts, which are caused by an asymmetrical access to land and water.

WHAT INCLUSIVE DECISIONS ON LAND AND WATER COULD DEVELOP INVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURE?

Mali has taken action on the ON area in awareness of these issues, commencing a rereading of the Decree of land management, developing a hydraulic master plan and through the adjustment of developmental models of “modern” and economically viable family farms. Any effort to bring together these two “engines of development” (family farms and private investment) is beneficial for easing potential conflicts.

In this way, it would be possible to overcome the controversy regarding massive land allocations or the facilities granted to large private investors, while raising and addressing fundamental questions: What are the potential models for the inclusive development of the ON area, and by extension for agriculture

5. Supported by technical and financial partners of Mali (World Bank, France, Netherlands, European Union) and in consultation with farmers.
in Mali? How can the area’s development objectives be aligned with social peace?

Mali, like other countries in the sub-region, is caught up in a land dilemma that raises issues of resource governance and on the multiplicity of rights operating in the area. Appropriate land use choices reflect the efforts of a country to reduce its asymmetries, in line with the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land and Other Natural Resources, proposed by the Committee for Food Security (CFS) in October 2011. Other stakeholders concerned (investors, civil society, technical and financial partners) will have no other option but to “choose sides” and to adjust their actions or support in the direction of these efforts, or to look elsewhere for land...

REFERENCES


Towards Agricultural Change?

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