

Large-scale Land Acquisition in Africa:

Impacts, Conflicts and Human Rights Violations: The Case of Addax Bioenergy in Sierra Leone

Over the past two decades, the demand for land and natural resources has surged, driven by the 2008 food price crisis and resulting land speculations. This has led to a significant increase in large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), commonly known as land grabbing. Across the African continent, more than 25 million hectares of land deals have been conducted since 2000. These LSLAs have coincided with human rights violations and conflicts, with local communities bearing the burden of the harm generated. Assigning land to investors, resulting in a decline in the well-being of the local population, carries a potential for conflict that cannot be overlooked. Despite the existence of inclusive land policies, they have not brought about lasting improvements in Sierra Leone's land sector.

Proponents of large-scale land acquisitions (LSLA) often frame it as a development opportunity for Africa. However, the intensification of industrial agricultural practices and monoculture plantations that are associated with LSLAs have contributed to countless human rights violations and severe negative social and environmental impacts. In Africa, an additional 14.3 million hectares of land deals have failed and have never become or are no longer operational. These failed deals leave scars and the incidences of bankruptcy and serial transfers of land ownership further increase the insecurity of affected communities that live nearby and/or on the land in question.

Most large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) do not uphold human rights, such as the principle of Free Prior and Informed Consent when negotiating land contracts or making land use changes. Furthermore, the projects associated with these acquisitions often do not provide the benefits promised to local communities. These types of agreements result in less secure land ownership, frequently resulting in rural communities being forced out without appropriate compensation, even if their ability to use the land is reduced. LSLAs are also prone to generating disputes over land and water resources. This may intensify pre-existing disputes, violence and distinctions within and between various communities.

Agricultural projects associated with LSLAs replace small-scale agriculture and therefore lead to a discharge of labour. Simultaneously, any jobs provided by companies on the land are most commonly day labourer work on an agricultural plantation, resulting in often atrocious working conditions. The reduction of land available for small-scale food producers, coupled with the projects focusing on producing non-food crops like sugarcane ethanol for export as agrofuel, reduces food output for households and communities and results in increased food insecurity. Additionally, the industrial agricultural plantations linked with several LSLAs hardly surpass small-scale food producers in terms of yield.

Additionally, the extensive agricultural approach used in industries causes harm to the environment, such as pollution and depletion of natural resources, ultimately leading to soil infertility. Poor land laws, along with their inadequate implementation, promote corruption and undermine democracy. As a result, international standards are not met.

The Swiss-based company Addax Bioenergy and Oryx group (AOG) invested 500 million Euros in the Makeni Project in the Republic of Sierra Leone to be operated by Addax Bioenergy Sierra Leone Ltd (ABSL). The project, which consists of a sugarcane estate, an ethanol refinery and a biomass power plant, was partially financed by AOG and funded by seven European and African development financial institutions (DFIs). It had an original project area of 54,000 hectares, but eventually ended up with a land use of 23,500 hectares.

In 2008, Sierra Leonean communities, persuaded by government representatives, parliamentarians, and local authorities briefed by a company, agreed to give up their land for a promised better future. Addax secured a 50-year lease, but residents were not adequately informed about the terms. The lease payments were insufficient compared to the loss of land for livelihoods. About 25,000 people were affected, yet ABSL, at its peak, employed only 3,850 national workers. The impacts were particularly severe for women whose struggle to feed their families became harder.

Suddenly, in June 2015, ABSL scaled down its operations, arguing that the Ebola outbreak as well as a low yield of sugar cane were responsible. This had severe consequences for the livelihoods and food security of the local people. Whereas the owners keep changing, the local people remain and carry both the risk and the negative consequences of land deprivation and sugar cane plantations. The hopes for long-term income from jobs in the factory or on the plantation land are now once again lost as workers were dismissed due to Corona and another scaling down of the production. The communities have to bear the negative impacts of this investment. These impacts persist and are obstacles for positive and sustainable development in the region.

The European development financial institutions (DFIs) involved in the project suffered no loss and reclaimed their loans. The Addax case has shown that the DFIs' commitments were more to their client Addax and their shareholders instead of the supposed beneficiaries of their projects. The African Development Bank and the European DFIs, the African and European governments and the national government of Sierra Leone are responsible for the negative side effects of the project. Land allocations to investors that subsequently leave the local population worse off than before harbour a potential for conflict that cannot be ignored. Inclusive land policies, although in place, did not lead to sustainable changes in the land sector of Sierra Leone.

Quelle: Bei dem hier angeführten Text handelt es sich um eine vereinfachte, gekürzte Version des Artikels "Large-scale Land Acquisition in Africa – Impacts, Conflicts and Human Rights Violations: The Case of Addax Bioenergy in Sierra Leone" von Africa-EU-Partnership von Dezember 2021. Der Originalartikel ist im Policy Brief hier zu finden: https://fianat-live-7318544636224c40bb0b0af5b09-745b6a8.divio-media.net/filer_public/bf/a2/bfa2f29d-36f9-4fcd-9e4d-d5cac36a9808/policy_brief_the_case_of_addax_bioenergy_en.pdf