

Landgrabbing in Sierra Leone: Occupied homeland



Foreign investors have been grabbing land from Sierra Leone's small farmers for decades. New laws are now aimed at preventing this.

Village Friday afternoon in the village of Tonka. The small village is about an hour's drive from the town of Makeni in Sierra Leone's Northern Province. In the oppressive midday heat, no one is out on the sandy road. The wooden stalls are empty. Most of the men are at the mosque praying. Women are standing with their feet in the Rokel River, on which the village of about 300 inhabitants is located, washing clothes. A group of boys of elementary school age is romping through the shallow water. At the edge of the river lies a forest with tall palm trees, from whose fruit oil is extracted. Palm oil is part of almost every dish in Sierra Leone. The forest is a pleasant and important source of shade.

Google Maps does not know Tonka. The village is too small; only a dirt road of sand and small stones leads to it, which turns into slippery mud during the rainy season. But Tonka gained international fame years ago. No other village lies so close to the premises of the Swiss company Addax Bioenergy. The company withdrew from the West African country back in 2016 and sold three quarters of its shares to Sunbird Bioenergy Sierra Leone Limited. The project did not meet expectations.

The Swiss are synonymous with land grabbing

But the name Addax - a press inquiry has gone unanswered - remains in common use, having become synonymous with land grabbing on a huge scale. Those affected will probably still be suffering from the consequences decades later.

In 2008, the company founded by Swiss billionaire Jean Claude Gandur negotiated a half-century lease on 55,000 hectares to produce biofuel from sugarcane. Locally and internationally, this sounded like a promising investment and raised high hopes for a better life.

Between 1991 and 2002, a civil war raged in Sierra Leone (population 8.9 million), killing 70,000 people and leaving some 2.6 million internally displaced. To date, the country ranks 181 out of 191 on the United Nations Development Index. Sierra Leone was down, and any prospect of a better future was welcome.

It was no different for Mohamed Koroma. The lanky man is a traditional chief of Tonka - the office, which is similar to an honorary mayor, is passed down within a family - and returns from the mosque with a group of men. They sit down in the meeting room, a concrete-covered area with a few wooden benches and plastic chairs. This is where the concerns of the village are discussed.

Koroma wears a green baseball cap with red trim, a white T-shirt and black pants. When speculation arose more than 15 years ago that a company from Europe was interested in the country, he was initially pleased. "White people were coming. I figured they would be an improvement to our lives." Koroma is not the only one who argues this way. In conversations, they often say that confidence in European investors was initially high.



Mohamed Koroma, village chief of Tonka Photo: Katrin Gänslar

Koroma has spent his entire life in Tonka and cannot imagine moving away. The inhabitants have always lived from subsistence farming. They produce for their own needs. If there is a surplus, it is sold to pay for school expenses, for example. "Our parents grew rice, peanuts, beans and cassava. They made palm oil and caught fish," he recalls of his childhood. It wasn't a bad life, he says, but it was also an exhausting one.

Investments seep away

Even today, there is a lack of opportunities to use technical equipment. Both the purchase and rental fees for a few hours can hardly be paid. According to World Bank estimates, three quarters of the rural population are still considered poor. The prospect of promises to build a factory and create jobs sounded promising. A regular wage also meant that the money could be used to pay for school expenses or medical bills, for example. In addition, there was the hope of lease income. Per acre (0.4 hectares), however, that's only \$3.60 - about \$9 per hectare per year. Until now, the land sizes were mostly based on estimates. Only half of the compensation goes to the owners. The government, the district and the paramount chiefs also receive compensation. There are almost 200 of these in Sierra Leone, each of whom presides over his or her own kingdom.

These traditional rulers are considered in part to be the "guardians of the land," mediating in conflicts; family estates are under their control. In addition to good contacts with the government and authorities, international investors depend primarily on the paramount chiefs at the regional level, because without them there is no successful deal. This puts them in a powerful position. By no means do they always represent the interests of the owners. Some are accused of collecting bribes from companies.

Landowners become supplicants

Although the villagers have the valuable and coveted land, they are far down the line, and decisions are usually made over their heads. The Addax case was no different, says Koroma. Texts had been written by lawyers*. "But to understand them, you have to be a lawyer yourself," criticizes John Brima Kargbo. He works for the Sierra Leone Network for the Right to Food (SiLNoRF), a nongovernmental organization that advocates for land rights and food security.

Kargbo has been following the Addax case for years and is one of the contacts on land issues in the region. His conclusion is clear: the village communities are not benefiting from the promised large-scale investments. Mohamed Koroma looks around the village square for a moment. One thing in particular has stuck in his mind: "All we were supposed to do was sign."



Here is Tonka - still. The village was about to be resettled

Picture: Katrin Gänslar

He feels the consequences every step of the way in Tonka: The landowners - often large families in which older and respected men make the decisions - have become supplicants, having given up all their land for decades. John Brima Kargbo says, "We tried to leave out the villages in the contracts. Cemeteries, places traditionally considered sacred, were not to be leased." However, he says, that did not succeed.

Just as bad, he says, is the fact that land once used for vegetable and grain cultivation is no longer available. Subsistence farming may still be practiced, but only in designated areas and by prior arrangement. There are no guarantees. Even without technical equipment, the land could yield many times more than the rent, which is hardly worth mentioning. This is also urgently needed: Population growth of 2.2 percent per year is increasing the demand for food. At the same time, inflation was 27 percent last year. A kilogram of rice - the main foodstuff in the country - now costs the equivalent of 0.65 euros. In 2021, it was 0.28 euros.

E10 for Europe

The announced factory has also failed to meet expectations. Well-paid jobs with long-term contracts have not been created for the people on the leased land, say John Brima Kargbo and Mohamed Koroma. Hiring for a few months and working on the plantation do not create security. With the help of the sugar cane grown there, bioethanol for the biofuel E10 was to be distilled and exported to Europe. Eight African and European development banks supported the project, including the German Investment and Development Company. Biofuels were seen as a way to meet climate targets, and the project in Sierra Leone as prestigious and forward-looking.

Ten minutes by car from Tonka, the factory gate is closed. A few dogs run around in front of it. The gas station that initially refueled company vehicles is out of service. Photographs should not be taken here. Although Sunbird Bioenergy Sierra Leone Limited still appears as a name, the investor is now Browns Investment, a company from Sri Lanka. Increasingly, corporations from Asia are leasing agricultural land on the African continent. These include corporations from Malaysia and India. Frequently changing investors, new ownership structures and contact persons make it increasingly difficult to establish contacts and demand information, says John Brima Kargbo.

This is particularly important for Tonka, which was already facing forced relocation due to its proximity to the factory site. There were similar fears in other places as well. In Tonka, however, people could no longer use the water due to pollution from pesticides and fertilizers. "Once a week, they brought us water in a tanker, which was not enough for the whole village," recalls Mohamed Koroma. It was only after protests on the ground, supported by non-governmental organizations in Europe, that Tonka received a water supply through the company's premises, the village chief recounts.

However, there is a lot of water for something else: The large sugar cane plantation - which was previously not native to the region around Makeni - needs water and gets it through irrigation systems many meters long. It is pumped from the river. Even shortly before the start of the rainy season, the leaves are therefore still fresh and green.

Politics went on the offensive

Since last year, two new laws, the Customary Land Rights Act and the National Land Commission Act, have been designed to prevent land grabbing on this scale. Land access for women has also been strengthened since the beginning of 2023 by the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act. Among other things, the laws stipulate that the state may no longer determine the amount of annual rent. Land may not exceed 15,000 hectares and contracts may run for a maximum of 50 years.

All commissions that deal with land issues must in future consist of at least 30 percent women

All commissions dealing with land issues must also consist of at least 30 percent women. In parts of the country, women also have the right to own land for the first time ever. Until now, they had to make do with small areas of land that, for example, male family members had allocated to them and that could also be taken away again without warning. The paradox is that about 70 percent of all agricultural workers are women, according to United Nations estimates. Sierra Leone has received much praise internationally for its laws. In the future, they could become a model for other countries on the continent. Despite parliamentary debates and discussions, however, they still lack visibility. Organizations like SiLNoRF have therefore started organizing events in villages and informing residents of their rights.

Around the bioethanol plant, the small villages are connected by brown-red gravel roads. All are part of the leased land. At one time, Addax actually had some of them laid out. Theoretically, the new investors could even be denied access. Mohamed B. Conteh is constantly on the road here on his moped, advising, informing and mediating. He heads an association of landowners, and his family has leased out some of the land itself, he tells us in Worreh Yeama Village, his home town. The village lies in a grove. Sunlight shines through the leaves. He is now very happy about the decision not to lease everything. He also says, "Our expectations have not been met."

"We have a lot of land where we could grow food, but not the money to do it" Mohamed B. Conteh, land owner

This cannot be reversed. The new laws come much too late for him and all landlords. Conteh says there is a clause in the contracts that would still have made it possible to exit after five years. "But who could have read and understood those?"

He turns and looks through mango trees and palms at the large areas of land, many hectares of which lie fallow despite the sugar cane plantation. Behind this, as he sees it, lies the real dilemma. "We have a lot of fertile land where cereals and vegetables could be grown. But we don't have the money, the people or the technology to do it." That's another reason why investors* are wanted, he said. "But they must offer us fair conditions and implement them," Conteh demands.