DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN INVESTMENTS IN IRRIGABLE LAND IN MALI: TENSIONS BETWEEN THE DREAM OF LARGE-SCALE FARMING AND THE REALITY OF FAMILY FARMING

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INTRODUCTION

Plans for large-scale land acquisitions by private investors have drastically increased, especially in Africa, which appears to be the new, privileged destination of land-grabbing (Cotula et al., 2009; Von Braun & Meinzen-Dick, 2009; World Bank, 2010). Targeting mostly developing countries that are not self-sufficient in their food production, these investments put at the forefront issues of food and land security. More broadly, they renew the debate on what kinds of agriculture, for which farmers and with which business models, could favor economic and social development.

In Mali, the Office du Niger (ON) area is presented as rich in land and water resources. Foreign states as well as foreign and local private companies target land in this zone (Cotula et al., 2009; Diallo et al., 2010; Brondeau, 2011). Irrigation schemes currently cover approximately 100,000 hectares (ha), and could potentially cover up to one or even two million ha. This area has thus always been at the heart of Malian agricultural development policies. During the past 20 years, it benefited from substantial economic growth; family farmers—mostly smallholders—were, and still are, the main actors of this economic success. Rice being the main urban staple food in Mali, they manage to massively produce rice (Bonneval et al., 2002), supplying half of the national market (Bélières, 2011).

Despite this success, since the 1960s, Malian decision makers have continued to promote large-scale farming, though without real results. Since 2000, the situation has changed. Numerous investors regularly approach the government in the hope of implementing large, land-based investments in the ON area. Those requests (from Libya, China, South Africa, Canada, Malaysia, USA, etc.) represent therefore a great opportunity for the Malian government, not only to develop large-scale farming but also to finance the extension of the irrigated area, a state dream since the 1930s. However, the benefits from those investments prove to be less obvious for smallholders themselves. The development of large-scale farming
might encroach on smallholders’ land, as their land rights are not secured, neither (i) in the irrigated zone, where the available area per family (in average 3 ha per household of 13 members) is decreasing, due to population growth, nor (ii) in the neighboring dry lands where they cultivate rain-fed cereals and have cattle pastures. Large-scale farming might also jeopardize smallholder access to other main resources like water and fuel wood. Competition over natural resources, especially land, is currently the main issue. Moving beyond the debates that often oppose large-scale agriculture against smallholders farming, this chapter analyzes policies and regulations that may impact on investment and land issues in the ON area. It questions to what extent family farming and large-scale farming can coexist in this context. The first section presents the status of land investment projects in the ON area. A second section analyzes the role of the government in promoting and regulating foreign and domestic investments. The following section then focuses on the social opposition to these large-scale investments. Finally, the last section discusses the impact of large-scale agribusiness on family farming and the unequal competition between smallholders and large companies. The conclusion highlights the existing, sharp contrast between the current poor results of large-scale farming and the effectiveness of small-scale, family farming.

Scarce information is available on large-scale agribusiness projects. Access to information is limited for Malian citizens and decision makers, as well as for international organizations. This is due to investor discretion regarding their plans, but also sometimes because of very vague business transactions. Diffusion of information is hindered by the sensitive nature of land issues in political debates. This chapter uses the results of previous studies (Burnod et al., 2010; Cotula et al., 2009; Diallo et al., 2010; Adamczewski et al., 2011) and field data collected from 200 interviews held in 2010 with agents from public institutions, regional or local governments, private developers, NGOs, farmers associations, trade unions, local populations, and other key informants. The interviews were conducted in the capital city, Bamako, and in the ON area. In addition, data was gathered from juridical laws, political orientations, and project documents.

**What Kinds of Investments Are Implemented or Planned in the ON Area?**

The whole ON area is state-owned, and land is officially titled in the name of the State. The Office du Niger, a public institution created in 1932 and reorganized by the Ordinance 96–188/P of 11 July 11 1996, manages and