



# Small Farm Holders' Response to the Global Land Deals in Benin

*The role of international solidarity linkages*

Paulette NONFODJI

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# **Small Farm Holders' Response to the Global Land Deals in Benin: the role of international solidarity linkages**

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## Abstract

In Benin, a country situated on the West coast of Africa, the agricultural sector constitutes the drive behind its economic growth. Of the about 9 million of its inhabitants, over 56% depend on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. This fact implies that farmland is of vital importance for the great part of the country's population. Unfortunately, however, the livelihoods of small farm holders are threatened by the ongoing large-scale investments in arable land, which involve thousands of hectares of agricultural land. In response to this threat, the rural communities in Benin supported by transnational social movements organize to stand up against the rush on their farmland. This paper seeks to grasp the reactions of the local small farm holders by focusing on the forms and strategies of resistance to the rush on farmland in rural Benin. Hereby the role played by both national and international civil society organizations to empower these farmers will be analysed in order to assess to what extent this international solidarity is efficacious. In its attempt to achieve the goals set here, the paper will draw for the most part on primary data gathered in the field in Benin.

## About the Author

**Paulette Nonfodji** is an independent researcher in the field of social sciences. Her research interests stretch to Chinese and African economic relations, the economic history of Africa and bio-fuels and land use issues.

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## Table of Contents

<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 The Small Farm Holders of Glo Training Center in Southern Benin .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3 Small Farm Holders of Glo Training Center and Citizenship .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4 A World of Grievances .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5 Avenues for Alternatives and Solutions.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>6 Conclusions .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>13</b>

### 1 Introduction

Outsiders of social movements often induce that common interests are at the base of transnational social movements (TSMs) and therefore these shared interests are supposed to nourish a kind of solidarity among them. There is, however, more than sheer shared interests stimulating solidarity. Tarrow argues that members of social movements must, in the first place, become aware of the perceived common interests in order for them to be able to engage in action. But above all it is the *feeling of solidarity or identity* which can be either *natural* or *inherited* that makes social movements (Tarrow 1998: 6).

The feelings are also those ones of belonging to a closed community whose focus is limited to its claims toward the opponents. Solidarity is thus a necessary condition for social movements to act in the same way as a group and it is brought about when members of social movements identify themselves with their claims (ibid: 119). Thus the notion of awareness is a crucial factor in order for perceived common interests to become a source of solidarity which, compounded by the feelings of belonging, makes TSMs and moves them to take action. In other words, independently from the perception that the outside world has of social movements, the factors that are crucial for the formation of these types of movements are self-awareness and the perceived common interests by the members of TSMs. These factors are also those which inspire them to take action.

The actions of TSMs are not confined to their national borders. On the contrary, TSMs' actions can span far beyond their national borders and become global as exemplified by Via Campesina or its opponent International Federation of Agricultural Producers. Both such movements seek from different perspectives to defend the rights of peasants whether they are poor or rich (Borras 2004). According to Tarrow, TSMs can be understood as being "*sustained contentious interactions with opponents – national or international – by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries*" (Tarrow, 1998: 184).

Can the French-based *Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement* (CCDF) and *Actifs et Retraités pour la Coopération et l'Aide au Développement* (ARCADE), which are objects of study in this paper, be conceived of as being TSMs? CCFD thinks of itself as being a development non-governmental organization which advocates international solidarity achieved in two major ways. On the one hand international solidarity for CCFD implies the fighting of hunger by tackling the roots of poverty everywhere in the world.

On the other hand, it is achieved through the support for actions or projects undertaken and executed worldwide by local communities themselves. Furthermore, international solidarity for CCFD also implies advocacy and awareness-raising aimed at educating the French public on development obstacles in the Global South and voicing the claims of the poor from this part of the world before Western decision makers.

While CCFD supports development projects worldwide, but with a greater focus on the Global South and China, ARCADE, which is based in Orvault (France), concentrates all of its actions only in one country: Benin. Set up in the mid-eighties by Joseph Michaud, a retired Catholic priest who had participated in development projects in that country, ARCADE has cooperated with local populations on a variety of projects, including the construction of a public latrine in Sô-Ava (a town partly built on stilts).<sup>1</sup> Besides shipping all kinds of second-hand, self-repaired materials to Benin. ARCADE also acts

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see the site of the government of Benin: <http://www.gouv.bj/communes/so-ava>  
And this YouTube film in French <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YliXhDaD-M>.

as partner to various organizations among which include CCFD and the peasant union *Synergy Paysanne* (also called *Synpa*), which also is subject of study of this paper. *Synpa*, also subject of study of this paper.

According to Tarrow, the feelings of solidarity and belonging underpinned by the perception of shared interests characterize TSMs. Furthermore, the awareness of shared interests makes TSMs act in the same way as a group which make claims against their opponents.. Hence the action of TSMs can take place either within or outside of their national borders. This conceptualization of TSMs captures well the functioning of CCDF, which advocates international solidarity as one of its fundamental convictions.

Hence it is based on these feelings of international solidarity that CCDF identifies itself with various forms of associations in the Global South that are engaged in fighting poverty with the aim to ameliorate the economic situation of the poor. It is also the same devotion to international solidarity that moves CCDF to identify its claims with those of the peasant union *Synpa* and in return to support it both financially and materially in its fight against the farmland rush in Benin. In so doing, CCDF shares the interests of the poor in the Global South and identifies itself with the claims of associations such as *Synpa*.. As for ARCADE, it can be advanced to a less extent that it is a TSM although it engages in actions across its national borders.

*Synpa* on the other hand is a local peasant movement that came into being in 2002<sup>2</sup> and is entirely funded by CCDF. It is the most important activist movement in the West African sub-region resisting the rush on farmland and genetically modified organisms in agriculture. Their work stretches over the borders of Benin to the neighbouring countries through information campaigns and workshops. They organize yearly training sections for both national and adjoining countries' farmers that aim at enhancing their traditional farming techniques and promoting the modernisation of agriculture (Nonfodji 2011).

The union shares the visions of CCDF in the sense that it is engaged in fighting the ongoing farmland rush in Benin, which aggravates poverty in the rural areas, by supporting small farm holdings through education and technical support. These areas in Benin have been plagued by a continuous rural exodus for decades (Governmental report 2002), creating a situation in which, as pointed out by Borrás and Franco (2010), the rural population is declining, while rural poverty on the other hand continues to increase. Borrás and Franco (2010) have indeed argued that the rural exodus in the last decades has resulted in a shift in balance between rural and urban populations and has led to the fact that more people are living in cities than in rural areas and thereby the active agricultural population has decreased. Nevertheless, the number of people affected by poverty in the countryside is higher than in urban areas (Borrás and Franco 2010).

*Synpa* and its supporters CCDF and ARCADE's challenge to ameliorate the economic situation of the growing number of poor small farm holders in the rural areas of Benin is further put to test by the recent rush on farmland which is encouraged by the government of Benin and its political elites (Nonfodji 2011, Neef and Touch 2012; see also Sédagban Hygin F. Kakai for a typology of the political actors in the land rush in Benin and Alden 2010 and E. Kushinga Makombe 2013 for the role of the state in this phenomenon). The deals involved in the rush on arable lands often go hand in hand with the fact that small farm holders end up losing the farmlands that provide them with their livelihoods. These land deals however did not leave the farmers and civil society organizations passive. Already at the onset of the farmland rush, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as GRAIN were among the first to denounce and resist the nascent situation (Borrás and Franco 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> [http://synergiepaysanne.over-blog.com/pages/Qui\\_sommes\\_nous\\_-1317566.html](http://synergiepaysanne.over-blog.com/pages/Qui_sommes_nous_-1317566.html).

Hence academic works show how in various ways farmers and civil society organizations started resisting the land deals taking place at a global scale. Schneider's cases studied in Cambodia outline well the different forms peasants' resistance take in the countryside of Cambodia. Open resistance like protests often leads to the use of violence toward poor and vulnerable peasants (Schneider 2011, Wolford and Safransky 2011, Adnan 2011). Accordingly, victims of land grabs resort to violent protests only when they are backed up by institutions or when they seem to not have any other choice even if, as Schneider shows (2011), these protests fail to gain substantive support from state authorities.

As an alternative to open resistance, covert forms of resistance, even though unorganized, allow poor peasants to still resist the dispossession of their lands and their displacements. Resistance is most successful when peasants are backed up by institutions (Famerée and Ho 2011, Roy 2011, Schneider 2011, Adnan 2011). Adnan, just like Famerée and Ho, argues that the support of institutions is a necessary condition for a successful outcome of peasants' resistance to land grabbing.

The same can be advanced as for the support CCFD and ARCADE offer *Synpa* in resisting the farmland rush through the promotion of small farm holdings, the training of farmers and campaigns against the farmland rush under the slogan: *[Benin] is not for sale. Let us protect our lands from the hunger of multinationals and agribusinesses.*



Borras et al. (2008: 180) pointed out that there is a need for better understanding how TSMs ally around their claims and what implications it entails. In the same line of reasoning, this support of institutions such as CCFD that often help peasants to successfully resist the farmland rush (which leads to their dispossession and their displacement) provides an understanding of the cooperation between these peasants and their supporters. In the same sense, it is argued that empirical studies of domestic political challenges or struggles unveil the deep meaning of cooperation between transnational and domestic social movements (Tarrow 1998: 185-193, Scoones 2008). Hence, through an exploration of the challenges faced by the peasant union *Synpa* in Benin, this work seeks to add to the literature on grasping how the alliance between CCFD, ARCADE and *Synpa* form the base of their strategies to respond and thereby to resist the ongoing farmland rush in Benin.

The first section will describe the group of small farm holders of the Glo training centre, which is the subject of this study. After having expounded on the interaction between state and civil society organizations, I will in a third section outline the grievances of the small farm holders with whom this paper is concerned. Finally before concluding, I will show how *Synpa* and its counterparts chose to resist the farmland rush in Benin.

## 2 The Small Farm Holders of Glo Training Center in Southern Benin

The small farm holders of the *Centre de Formation Agricole* of Glo (Further referred to us CFA Glo) in the rural surroundings of the city of Cotonou, Benin who are the concern of this study and whom I refer to here as small farm holders or smallholders have some economic and political characteristics

in common. This group of small farm holders is a mixed composition of young and mature adults of whom the majority was adult women. They come from all over Benin and from the neighbouring country of Togo to meet for several days at the CFA Glo training centre. The training covers matters such as the techniques of semi-mechanized farming, the maintenance and reparation of pieces of farm machinery and methods for enhancing crop yields. This training for different groups of small farm holders take place each year and last four weeks.

Their education levels vary. While some of them did not enjoy any education at all, others have finished primary or high school. One of them has a university degree in law. Although most of them are dwellers of rural areas of Benin and Togo, others live alternatively in the urban city of Cotonou and its surrounding villages. For instance Mr Yaovi,<sup>3</sup> who holds a university degree in law, is an employee of a non-governmental organization. In his free time, Mr. Yavovi farms a plot of land situated in one of the surrounding villages of the city of Cotonou.

At their home villages, they all work a piece of farmland of variable sizes. The most fortunate of them, although he is illiterate, works a few hectares of land on which he grows cash crops like pineapple, with the help of other day labourers. Specific to this group is that all of them combine to some extent subsistence farming with cash crop. Hence they produce for their respective households and for the local or regional markets.

Strikingly, however, is the composition of the group. The majority of the group members were young adults and adult women. Most of these women were either illiterate or they have enjoyed only a few years of education. They all practice subsistence agriculture and sometimes they succeed in having surpluses which they sell on the local markets so that with the money they make, they could not only provide for the needs of their family, but most importantly they could pay for the education of their children, as Mrs. Ayaba confided in me. For Mrs. Ayaba, who is illiterate, it is of primordial importance that her boy gets an education, she said. Women are very active in the agricultural sector in Benin where agriculture plays an important role in the national economy.

In 1986 estimates showed that the agricultural sector output represents 40% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and offers job opportunities for 70% of the national workforce. The growth in food crops greatly exceeds that of other type crops cultivated (Jong de, 1986: 33). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2008 the agriculture sector's output represented only 20% of the country's GDP, while 60% of the active population worked in agriculture (OECD 2008: 140). Also, considering the importance of agriculture in its economy, Benin invests in scientific staff for research and development in agriculture through its National Agricultural Research Institute (INRAB), although these investments have been decreasing since 2008 (Stads & Hinvi 2010: 1, OECD 2008: 143). All in all, Benin produces generally enough food for its own population (Jong de, 1986: 36).

However with the rush on farmland by national and international actors for speculative purposes or for growing fuel crops, one rightly wonders if the country will be able to continue feeding itself. Indeed the last decade has seen the proliferation of land deals in the Global South and this has caused a lot of ink to flow. In the academic and media arenas, various factors have been pointed out as being the driving forces behind the global land rush, particularly in Africa (Zoomers 2010, Vermeulen & Cotula 2009b: 52-59). Benin, a West African country where Nonfodji has analysed the approaches of Chinese and Western companies to the land rush (Nonfodji 2011), has not been spared by the land grabbing.

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<sup>3</sup> All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. One exception is made in the case of Jean-Paul.



However both national and international civil society organizations were fast to show their response to the farmland rush in Benin. The national peasants union *Synergie Paysanne*, supported by the French CCFD and in cooperation with ARCADE, devises strategies to counter the rush on farmland and to empower small farm holders. But before getting deeper into their strategies, I will expound on how the small farm holders of the training center of Glo feel about their Beninese citizenship.

### 3 Small Farm Holders of Glo Training Center and Citizenship

In their analysis of the relationships between the state and the civil society, Rothchild and Lawson assert that civil society groups, while they are active in the public arena, also recognize the state as a legitimate agent that is endowed with authority. At the same time, in their interactions with the state, civil society groups aspire to influence the economic, political and social values which govern the society as a whole (Rothchild & Lawson 1994: 256). In this light what can be said of *Synpa* and its international counterparts CCFD and ARCADE, which can be considered types of civil society organizations active in the public arena in Benin and which are trying to thwart land rush in that country?

As one of the outcomes of the effects of the structural adjustment programme in the eighties and nineties, a group of young farmers and future members of *Synpa* met in 1999 to devise a new way of rural development and to debate the situation of peasants in general, and more specifically the problems facing young, aspiring farmers in Benin. Following this very first meeting, fieldwork had been conducted for further analysis of the situation facing farmers and as a result the peasant movement *Synergie Paysanne* came into being in 2002 (interview with employee of the peasants union, 14 January 2011).

Nowadays *Synpa* is a union comprised of more than eleven hundred members spread all over the country. For its funding it depends on fees from its members and from international civil society organizations such as CCFD, also known as *CCFD-Terre Solidaire*. As a part of the union's norms, members of *Synpa* are not allowed to accept a position in national politics, however they do lobby the government to defend their interests. Further and maybe most importantly, *Synpa* is on the one hand the link between the state and the rural populations whose participation in the public arena is more or less visible, and on the other hand, is the bridge connecting international civil society organizations overseas and the rural communities at the national level.

One such important organization that contributes greatly to the existence of *Synpa* is CCFD, which is a roman catholic and French civil society organization dedicated to promoting worldwide development regardless of the origin, culture or religion of the recipients of its support. International solidarity is central in the thinking of CCFD and the development of the poor is the means of expressing its international solidarity. CCFD is a pro-poor organization that puts the individual at the centre of its actions. Development, according to this Christian organization, is a process which is realized in cooperation with the people who need it. It is also about rich and poor together being the actors of sustainable development achieved by solidarity in order to bring out the potential wealth in each individual. According to this conception of development, individuals have the capacity of being the agents of their own history.

Hence in the vision of the CCFD, one has to be reminded that the individual comes first, which means that the material is subordinated to the human being. From there stems the absolute need to respect the fundamental rights of every individual and the duty to put natural resources [thus land], economics, science and technique at the service of the human being. Furthermore, the poor has to be allowed to participate in making the choices that improve his or her situation because development has to be achieved by the people themselves who are directly concerned.

Since CCFD sees development as a means to fight hunger, one of its fields of action is food sovereignty. According to CCFD, food sovereignty means that each country must define by itself what agricultural and food policies to adopt. Thus as a consequence the CCFD will not stop defending the right of countries to strengthen their policies and their agricultural markets for national and regional needs. It will promote viable and sustainable family farming and it will question the adequacy of policies for the development of bio-fuels as alternative energy sources.

CCFD supports, among others, agricultural cooperatives and unions. It works together with other prominent civil society organizations such as La Via Campesina. Its activities stretch from East and Central Europe to Africa, Latin America and Asia. In partnership with other civil society organizations in developing countries, CCFD supports development projects initiated by the local people themselves who are organized in associations. But just like many other such organizations, CCFD also depends on gifts and the work of its thousands of volunteers to be able to continue its work of solidarity in developing countries worldwide.

At this level, we want to know to what extent the visions of CCFD steer the strategic choices of *Synpa*. Just like CCFD, *Synpa* promotes pro-poor policies aimed at enhancing the quality of life of peasants in Benin. It also embraces the struggle against bio-fuel production and the land rush in Benin and it argues, in the same vein as CCFD, that family farming is the way for peasants to prosper and for their country, Benin, to acquire food sovereignty. However *Synpa* does not take only the visions of CCFD over. It extends and adapts the visions of its financial supporter, CCFD, to fit the context of peasants in Benin. For instance in an interview with an employee of *Synpa*, Mr Houndji literally said:

*Il faut une politique qui favorise les jeunes paysans, [il faut] influencer la politique pour que les paysans se sentent citoyens (Interview with Mr Houndji, 14 January 2011).<sup>4</sup>*

In other words, this militant believes that peasants in Benin do not feel that they are considered as citizens and thereby he is suggesting that while some groups of the people of Benin feel that they are recognized as full citizens based on the way they are treated by the government, peasants do not. Considering the fact that over 50 percent of the population of Benin are farmers, this statement must concern a substantial number of peasants.

This section opened with the assertion of Rothchild and Lawson according to whom movements such as *Synpa* and CCFD accept the state as a legitimate agent that is endowed with authority and with which they interact in the attempt to influence the economic, political and social values which govern the society as a whole. With the similarities and the differences in their visions, *Synpa* and CCFD do recognize the state of Benin as a legitimate agent that has to be influenced if they want to ameliorate the economic and political situation of small farm holders in Benin.

Accordingly we wonder how do *Synpa* and its counterpart CCFD interact with the government of Benin in order to further the cause of small farm holders. It is also worth taking into consideration that the above statement, which suggests that farmers in Benin do not feel like they are treated as citizens of that country, comes from an active militant of farmers' rights whose voice represents thousands and thousands of peasants' voices. Personally, being aware of the fact that inequality among professional categories exists a bit everywhere, I expected some kind of inequality between farmers in Benin and other professional groups but I was not aware of the fact that a subgroup among the farmers felt like they were not citizens of Benin which caught me very much by surprise.

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<sup>4</sup> The authority must give priority to young farmers. [It] must make peasants feel that they are citizens.

What, thus, are the claims of *Synpa* and its partner CCFD toward the government of Benin? What are their grievances? How do they resist the rush on farmland in Benin through their interaction with the government? In the following section, I will expound on the grievances of the small farm holders in Benin and show that some of their grievances are also points on which *Synpa's* visions differ from those of CCFD. In other words, although *Synpa* may be said to be steered by the visions of the CCFD, the context of Benin in which the peasants union evolves does shape to some extent *Synpa's* visions and defines the direction of its struggle.

### 4 A World of Grievances

As mentioned earlier, I was astounded by Mr Hounbedji's statement that peasants in Benin are not recognized as full citizens. I did not realize that farmers in Benin feel that way because of my experience with farmers' families in my childhood in Benin. As a child in primary school in Sekanmè, a small village in the South of Benin, my best friend Henriette's parents were farmers (mine were not). During the long breaks of the mid-day, we used to go to her parents' farm and pick corncoobs that we grilled or cooked and ate. Sometimes we picked peanuts, which we ate raw, and Henriette's parents would shout at us that we would get caught for eating raw peanuts. As adult I can't remember having become sick because of those raw peanuts.

Hence it did not occur to me that a portion of the peasants in Benin feel like they are not citizens and that touched me deeply. The fact that this be the case in other parts of the world did occur to me but that the same was valid in Benin was quite difficult for me to accept. Thus caught by surprise by the words of my informant, I sought to understand what he meant by the fact that peasants do not feel they are citizens.

Minimal access to land, aggravated by the rush on farmland over the last few years, turns out to be the major grievance amongst farmers. In the concerned areas of study in the south of Benin, traditionally land is considered to be a sacred collective good that is managed only by either the head of the family or the village chief. The latter is the only one entitled to determine the modes of access or usage that can be made of the collective land. A clear distinction is made between land for residential purposes and land for agriculture, which is often situated just outside of the inhabited parts of the village. In general, access to land is guided by customary laws in which plots of land are given by the head of the family or by the chief of the village to the village members. The plots allotted are meant exclusively for agricultural purposes and never to be sold.

Next to the fact that family members can access land through the allocation of plots of land, inheritance is the other possible mechanism for youngsters and would-be farmers to gain access to land. But both ways, that is access to land through inheritance and family owned farmland, have become problematic. Most people cannot inherit land and as families are composed of a large number of members, family lands have to be divided into smaller plots amongst family members. As a result, each family member ends up with too small a plot of land to practice subsistence agriculture or small-scale production for the market. This is also the case for Mr Hounbedji, my informant.

Furthermore the rush on farmland initiated by native and foreign investors has come to worsen the situation regarding access to land for farmers. As a result of the commoditisation of land, the existing system of management of collective land is upset and land is no longer considered sacred and something which cannot be sold. In 2009, faced with the rush on farmland in Benin, *Synpa*, the peasants union, felt compelled to conduct research on the field. Their findings reveal that tens of thousands of hectares of farmland had already been ceded to investors. One thing leading to another, more and more young and aspiring farmers are losing hope that they may obtain a plot of land to farm.

Thus farmers in Benin face two major hurdles of which access to land is the biggest obstacle lying on the road to making a career in agriculture. The other barrier is access to finance. Indeed the peasants who succeeded in getting a decent plot of land to farm lack the means of production to develop that piece of land. This lack is the direct consequence of the fact that farmers do not have access to credit or any other kind of funding. Currently at the national level, existing micro credit facilities – which are both from local government and foreign institutions – are credits at usurious rates of interest of around 24 per cent (Interview with Mr Hounbedji, 14 January 2011). As for investment credits, which are given for investments in machinery, the payments begin three months after the date the credit is granted.

According to Mr Hounbedji, this period is too short for a farmer to grow and sell a crop in order to make the needed money available to start paying the instalments of the loans. But in the instance the farmer succeeded in growing a crop in such short term, he or she still has to consider what the market is paying for the crops grown. If the market is flooded with his or her type of crops, the price received is too low to cover the investment expenditures and to pay back the loan. Hence, to get a better price for the crops, the farmer has to wait until the market offers better prices for his or her crops.

Farmers have to adopt this kind of speculative attitude in order to get a better price for their product because they do not have any say in the setting of the price of their products. The dealers who are intermediaries between these farmers and the market are those who determine the price, which is always low and does not cover the investment costs made by the peasants. As a result, the farmers don't make enough money to cover the costs of growing crops. Therefore the losses made on their investments lead to a situation of persistent poverty among farmers.

Women represent another vulnerable subgroup among farmers in Benin. Most specifically, pregnant women farmers suffer, not just from the lack of medical institutions close to home but also they are subject to discrimination from the medical staff when they manage to get to a hospital. For a pregnant woman farmer there is no decent means of transport for her to get to the hospital when she goes into labour. And when she succeeds in getting to the hospital, the medical staff does not treat her with respect or give her the same treatment as that given to women working for the government.

Hence in short, a portion of the peasants in Benin do not feel they are citizens because of the barriers to land access and finance on the one hand, and various forms of discrimination directed to women farmers on the other. At this point, it is interesting to note toward whom the grievances are addressed. Who are, according to the peasants' union *Synpa*, the recipients of peasants' complaints in Benin?

The government of Benin is acknowledged by *Synpa* as the major actor who is at the origin of their grievances. The government, which defines the policies concerning agriculture, does not make means available to people who want to become farmers to do so. Most of all its policies do not improve the living conditions of farmers. As such, the union aims at exercising pressure on the government to make it easier for people who want to become farmers to do so and also for peasants to truly feel they are citizens just like any other citizens in Benin.

Another point of contention for *Synpa* is the Beninese government's preferential treatment of farmland investors. Central government officials indicate good farmland for crops in the region of interest to the investors but they displace their role and responsibilities to lower level government agents to sort out further land issues with the investors. So doing the central government of Benin

pretends not to be aware of the land deals that are taking place. For this reason the peasant union *Synpa* decided to go public and reveal the ongoing deals to the outside world

Furthermore the central government of Benin advocates large scale industrialized agriculture together with transgenic farming and it claims that small scale agriculture will not be able to feed the growing population of the country. The governmental rationale goes on maintaining that for small scale agriculture to feed the population, its output has to be multiplied by three, which according to the officials is not possible to realize with that type of agriculture. Therefore, large scale industrialized agriculture is the only promising out way of the impasse. To counter this assertion, *Synpa* engages in promoting the modernisation of small scale agriculture.

The other actors who are the cause of the grievances of *Synpa* are the investors in farmland. The majority of these investors are native private individuals from Benin who, in some cases, make the investments in the name of multinationals, religious groups or politicians. In very few cases corporations are involved in the investments in the farmland. Civil servants and self-employed professionals are also investing in the land.

*Synpa*, with the support of CCFD, identifies the government of Benin and investors in farmland as the major actors behind the grievances of the union. The category of investors includes private individual investors, civil servants and politicians, religious groups, self-employed individuals and corporations. While identifying the sources of its grievances, the union also comes with solutions. Hence the following section expounds on the paths *Synpa* chose to counter the farmland rush in Benin, in solidarity with other civil society organizations.

### 5 Avenues for Alternatives and Solutions

In 2008 the central government of Benin adopted the policy called Strategic Plan for the Revival of the Agricultural Sector (PSRSA<sup>5</sup>), which supposes to make the country an agricultural power by 2015. To achieve this goal of boosting the agricultural sector, the government has also implemented the programme for the promotion of the mechanization of agriculture (PPMA<sup>6</sup>), which aims at providing peasants with tractors imported from China and India. A motorized and mechanized agricultural sector practised on large acreages became a top priority for the government. Indeed the government believes that to become an agricultural power in Africa, it must increase productivity through automation and mechanization of large scale agriculture. Therefore it acquires a few hundred tractors with different accessories for farm mechanization. It also dispatched civil servants to China and India to specialize in the use and maintenance of these tractors

However the policies are not giving the expected outcomes and a number of problems arose concerning the feasibility of the automation and the mechanization of the agricultural sector in Benin. A common issue is that the tractors do not fit certain types of soil. For instance, the tractors are often not powerful enough to deal with clayish ground. As a result, farmers prefer to work with the hoe and animal haulage while the tractors stand unused and parked in the compounds of government offices. In fact it happens quite often that the agricultural machinery breaks down. About one-third of the few hundred tractors acquired have broken down and, at the moment of this writing, as the fifteen reparation centres promised by the state are not yet functional or are under construction, a substantial part of the machinery is currently useless.

Furthermore, the government offers attractive prices and reimbursement conditions for private farmers who want to buy a tractor, but the acquisition price, which runs from seven to nine thousand

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<sup>5</sup> PSRSA: Plan Stratégique de Relance du Secteur Agricole.

<sup>6</sup> PPMA : Programme de Promotion de la Mécanisation Agricole.

Euros, remains out of the reach of most peasants. Although laudable, the ambitions of Benin's central government to build the nation's agricultural sector seem to be failing. Here, backed up by CCFD for the most part, steps in *Synpa*, which maintains that the mechanization and the motorization of the agricultural sectors have to occur on a case-by-case basis.

In other words, the peasants' union believes that the emphasis on mechanization and motorization of the whole agricultural sector will fail to increase productivity. Rather than deciding to apply mechanized agriculture, studies should be conducted with the aim of revealing to what extent mechanized and motorized agriculture is compatible with family farming practices on small plots of land. Mechanization, it is argued, can also be seen as a process of transformation and modernization of small scale farming which can slow the rural exodus of the youngsters and which also will lead to the production of competing crops. Therefore it is a necessity to increase the productivity of family farming.

It is also *Synpa's* belief that the mechanisation of agricultural activities has to be adapted to the local context. That is to say that the mechanisation and the modernisation of small scale agriculture has to occur sector by sector because, according to the union, not all sectors need heavy mechanisation. While animal haulage is best suited to some sectors, in other situations mechanized or motorized agriculture is a better option to consider. Therefore *Synpa* gives primacy to a sector-by-sector approach to the mechanization and modernization of small scale agriculture.

To move on from speech to action, the *Coopérative d' Utilisation de Machine Agricole* (CUMA) has been set up. This is an association which reinforces solidarity among peasants and to which even non-member peasants turn to when they need to rent a piece of agricultural machinery for low prices. This agricultural equipment is owned and managed by the peasants who are members of CUMA. The rental system of CUMA functions alongside the governmental PPMA policy, which also rents agricultural machinery to farmers.

Next to CUMA, *Synpa* also organizes an annual training workshop that spans a few weeks and which is open to small farm holders from all over Benin as well as the neighbouring country Togo. The aim of the training is to teach farmers how to use and repair agricultural equipment. Among the trainees a few are selected for an advanced course so that they can become the teachers for future training activities. As the majority of the trainees are illiterate, the classes are given in French and are translated into the different mother tongues of the participants. Under the supervision of a guide, I paid two visits to the training centre where I met both trainers and trainees.

The international solidarity between *Synpa* and its counterparts CCFD and ARCADE is demonstrated by the trainers who come from France with their agriculture equipment for the training shipped by containers to Benin. They are voluntary retired civilians working for the organization ARCADE, which since 2009 has provided the agricultural training to peasants of the CFA Glo centre. ARCADE was created in 1986 and has been active in Benin for over two decades. In addition to providing training in agricultural skills, the association is active in the field of hygiene and health in Sô-Ava, a town on stilts in southern Benin. Although in 2012 the association lost one of its members during a training session at the CFG Glo center in Benin, ARCADE continues to support *Synpa* and their collaboration did not diminish because of the loss of Jean-Paul, to whom I pay once more my respects in this paper.

At the national level, the civil society organization Songhai contributes to the realization of the yearly training by providing agricultural machinery to *Synpa*. Songhai, which was created in 1985, also trains young agricultural entrepreneurs who at the end of their training could get attractive loans from the organization in order to start their own farming businesses. Hence a web of linkages between

national and international civil society organizations makes it possible for *Synpa* to pursue its objective of modernizing small scale farming among peasants in Benin. The approach of all these civil society organizations to the agricultural sector in Benin also explains that they outperform the PPMA policy of the state. As Wolf states,

*Communities which form parts of a complex society can thus be viewed no longer as self-contained and integrated systems in their own right. It is more appropriate to view them as the local termini of a web of group relations which extend through intermediate levels from the level of the community to that of the nation.*

Wolf 1956b: 1065

*Synpa* and the peasant communities in Benin can be seen as the “local termini of a web” of networks not just at the national level, but at the global level as well. Hence, the small farm holders in Benin are the “local termini” of the constellations of relations connecting on the one hand *Synpa*, Songhai and the society of Benin at large and on the other hand CCDF and ARCADE at the global level. As a result global answers to the land grab are formed in the local context of rural Benin.

Besides the modernization of small scale agriculture, the other chapter of the struggle of *Synpa* is summarized in the question: how to ease access to land and loans for aspiring farmers, especially the youngsters? *Synpa* believes that policies to ease access to land and funds for peasants have become a necessity. Thus in 2004 the peasants union decided to devise a bill which will govern access to land while at the same time thwarting the negative effects of the commoditisation of land.

The bill is the result of a consensus between the union, the government and traditional chiefs. It reconciles both customary and modern laws on rural land and was promulgated in 2007 as the law of *16 October 2007*. However it is noteworthy to point out that not all the amendments pursued by *Synpa* have been included in the promulgated law and that the union continues its struggle to make the central government accept the suggested amendments.

As for facilitating access to loans for would-be farmers, the peasants union proposes two major solutions. First the government must design policies that make two types of investments in agriculture available, notably one type of investment for agricultural machinery spread over a number of years and a second type of investment in the form of annual credits that are destined for the purchase of seeds and fertilizers and for paying labour costs.

Next *Synpa* requires the government to set structures up which make it possible for farmers to get a fair price that covers at least the costs made by the peasants. A work in the field conducted by the union has revealed that merchants are those ones who set the price of the crops but not the peasants. According to *Synpa* the price of the crops must be set in a process which involves merchants, peasants and consumers.

In other words, merchants cannot confine themselves to the sole dynamics of profit-making. Besides, the price for the crops should not be greater than the financial means of the average consumers, and it should cover the production costs of the farmers while creating profit for the merchants. However the union recognizes the complexity of such a process and the slim chances of its success.

But it believes that to reach the goal of getting a fair price for the peasants' products, the union must engage in a continuous dialogue with the government and it hopes, in so doing, to influence the government's policies in favour of peasants. It thus pleads that the government adopts policies that make the means of production accessible to people who want to become farmers and that it takes measures to improve the living conditions of farmers. As such, the union aims at exercising

continuous pressure on the government so that it becomes easier for people to become farmers and make peasants feel like full citizens just like any other citizens in the country.

Resisting the rush on farmland for the peasant union *Synpa* and its counterparts CCFD and ARCADE goes beyond campaigns against the investors in farmland. It most importantly involved actions that embody concrete solutions to the problems faced by small farm holders in Benin. As such, campaigns against the farmland rush are compounded by the promotion of family farming and all kinds of support to the small farm holders.

*Synpa* and its supporters' response to the farmland rush in Benin can be summarized as their belief in the modernization of small scale agriculture through selective mechanization and motorization of family farming. Supported in this by national and international civil society organizations (CCFD, ARCADE) and Songhai, the union is accomplishing astonishing results in that it outperforms the central government of Benin which aims at modernizing large scale agriculture. Furthermore *Synpa* continues exercising pressure on the government so that this latter adopt policies that facilitate access to land and funds to would-be farmers.

## 6 Conclusions

Resistance to the global farmland rush takes different forms across the Global South. In some cases resistance is either overt or covert. In other situations it is a mix of these two forms, which comes in handy. In Cambodia, for instance, because overt resistance led to violence exercised against the protesters, alternative forms of resistance to the dispossession of farmland has been sought. Overall farmers' movements resisting the global farmland rush find support in their international counterparts.

Hence in Benin, the peasant union *Synpa*, backed up by transnational movements CCFD and ARCADE, resists the rush on farmland by challenging the government's agricultural policies and by designing and putting into practice its own strategies. Accordingly, it is the diverging ways and purposes to achieve the modernization of agriculture in Benin which distinguishes *Synpa* from the central government of Benin. While the latter maintains that modernized large scale agriculture is the only way for the country to achieve agricultural power in Africa, the peasants' union advocates selective mechanization and modernization of small scale agriculture as one of the means to feed the population and to thwart the current land grab in Benin.

To achieve its goals, *Synpa* concentrates its struggle among others on the promotion of family farming practised on small plots of land and it exercises pressure on the government to amend the law of 16 October 2007, which governs access to land in such a way that encourages land access amongst those who want to embrace a career in the agricultural sector, particularly young farmers. But the union's efforts to influence the policies of the government are quite limited since its members are not allowed to participate in politics and it barely disposes of the services of lobbyists in the government who could push their wishes through.

Nevertheless, what concerns *Synpa* is to promote family farming and its modernization in a selective way; the outcomes look very promising thanks to the national and international solidarity of its counterparts. Indeed the support of both the national and international civil society organizations CCFD, ARCADE and Songhai has been critical to the results achieved by *Synpa*. To paraphrase Wolf, *Synpa* and the peasant communities in Benin are the "local termini of a web of group relations" (Wolf 1956b) which benefit from international solidarity, without which the peasants' union would not survive.



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A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

### Small Farm Holders' Response to the Global Land Deals in Benin: the role of international solidarity linkages

In Benin, a country situated on the West coast of Africa, the agricultural sector constitutes the drive behind its economic growth. Of the about 9 million of its inhabitants, over 56% depend on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. This fact implies that farmland is of vital importance for the great part of the country's population. Unfortunately, however, the livelihoods of small farm holders are threatened by the ongoing large-scale investments in arable land, which involve thousands of hectares of agricultural land. In response to this threat, the rural communities in Benin supported by transnational social movements organize to stand up against the rush on their farmland. This paper seeks to grasp the reactions of the local small farm holders by focusing on the forms and strategies of resistance to the rush on farmland in rural Benin. Hereby the role played by both national and international civil society organizations to empower these farmers will be analysed in order to assess to what extent this international solidarity is efficacious. In its attempt to achieve the goals set here, the paper will draw for the most part on primary data gathered in the field in Benin..



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