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THE GLOBAL CONVERGENCE OF LAND AND WATER STRUGGLES IN WEST AFRICA: BUILDING A STRONG AND UNITED PEOPLE

*Massa Koné and Chantal Jacovetti*¹

Established in October 2014 during the African Social Forum in Dakar, the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles (Convergence) became consolidated in March 2015,² during the World Social Forum in Tunis. The first regional chapter in West Africa was founded in June 2015,³ during a meeting held at the Nyéléni international training center for agroecology in Sélingué (Mali). The Convergence comprises several social and grassroots movements and various civil society organizations (CSOs), which are engaged in the defense of the rights to land, water and seeds. The cornerstone of the Convergence is the declaration entitled “Rights to Water and Land, a Common Struggle—Dakar to Tunis: Declaration of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles” (Dakar to Tunis Declaration),⁴ which sets out the vision, principles and aspirations of the Convergence. The Dakar to Tunis Declaration is the pillar of a strong and unified movement that fights for policies that promote human rights, including rights to land and water within the framework of food sovereignty.

1 [Massa Koné](#) is the representative of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles in West Africa. [Chantal Jacovetti](#) is member of the National Coordination of Farmers' Organizations (CNOP) and of the Malian Convergence against Land Grabbing (CMAT). These two organizations are part of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles in West Africa. They aim to raise awareness on land grabbing and the importance of guaranteeing access to natural resources in the region. Special thanks to Priscilla Claeys (University of Louvain and French Institute of Pondichery) and Valentin Hategekimana (FIAN International) for their support in reviewing this article. This article was originally written in French.

2 FIAN International. *Dakar to Tunis Declaration, a common ground for land and water struggles*, April 4, 2015. Available at: www.fian.org/library/publication/dakar_to_tunis_declaration_a_common_ground_for_land_and_water_struggles.

3 FIAN International. “Right to Water and Land, a Common Struggle in West Africa”, June 25, 2015. Available at: www.fian.org/en/news/article/right_to_water_and_land_a_common_struggle_in_west_africa.

4 Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles. *Rights to Water and Land, a Common Struggle—Dakar to Tunis: Declaration of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles*. Tunis: March 28, 2015. Available at: www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/media_publications2015/Dakar_to_Tunis_Declaration_EN_finalfinal.pdf.

SAME PLIGHT, SAME FIGHT

Water and land grabbing benefits harmful industrial agriculture, at the expense of rural and urban communities. It strongly destabilizes areas of poverty and has an impact on family farming, which feeds and employs over 70% of the population and contributes on average, to 40% of the GDP.⁵ Land rights are violated in a climate of absolute violence and impunity: Forced evictions destroy social cohesion, cultural identity and local food systems in communities, not to mention the disastrous consequences for agri- and ecosystems.⁶ This social and economic disruption paves the way towards perilous migration to either Europe, the suburbs of large African cities, gold-mining areas or even armed groups.

Donor agencies and multinationals are leading an offensive surge to influence legislation in their favor and to impose an industrial model of agriculture through programs such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa,⁷ and Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), thus threatening and destabilizing countries, communities and economies—and shaking the very foundations of sovereignty. Chemical products, hybrid seeds, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), associated to livestock concentration, selection and intensification, monocultures and all-out mechanization run counter to peasant agroecology, which holds the key to a future innovative agriculture that is respectful of and adapted to peoples' knowledge (both know-how and life skills) among communities. This type of agriculture is environmentally-friendly and conserves and enriches soil, biodiversity and production overall, with little or no impact on the environment, and thus contributes to combatting global warming.

West African states and their bodies, including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic and Monetary Union of West Africa (EMUWA), should also not give in to the desires of the World Bank, which aims at improving the business climate, nor should they heed the siren's song of 'free' trade agreements, such as Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). These initiatives do not only have harmful social and environmental but also fiscal consequences, as they destroy local economies. In order to achieve sustainable and shared prosperity, it is essential to guarantee that communities can safeguard and control natural resources.

A MOVEMENT MARCHING FOR A PEOPLES' ECOWAS: RIGHTS TO LAND AND WATER, A COMMON STRUGGLE!

In light of this disastrous situation, over ten thousand people, including women, men and young people, from fifteen different countries in West Africa, decided to come together between March 3 and March 19, 2016, under the slogan 'Land is my life!'. The aim was to share their analyses and formulate their proposals for a strong West Africa, which respects not only community and individual human rights, but also our commons: land, water and peasant seeds. Thus, the Convergence organized a West African caravan for land, water and peasant seeds and published a document of analyses and proposals, entitled "The Convergence's Green Booklet: Advocacy Document" (Green Booklet),⁸ with support from national platforms. The goals are to:

- raise awareness among the communities of West Africa on the grabbing of natural resources, such as land, water and seeds, as well as on related challenges and issues;
- mobilize West African social movements and organizations in order to build a strong movement, capable of asserting and securing community rights, while promoting family farming based on peasant agroecology and food sovereignty;
- become engaged in favor of peace, justice, social and environmental justice, gender equality, public health and the fight against climate change;
- call on national political and administrative authorities as well as sub-regional institutions (ECOWAS and EMUWA) to uphold their obligations to realize human rights and to heed to our appeals and proposals on the implementation of the *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*,⁹ the *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security*,¹⁰ the Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa,¹¹ and their implementation in the sub-region, which is currently being negotiated at ECOWAS, as well as the EMUWA's different regulations on the risks linked to biotechnologies. The current phase of these processes is paramount, therefore they must unfold in a transparent manner, ensuring the effective participation of those organizations that represent the most affected;
- support all activists and communities that defend human rights linked to land, water and seeds, and denounce their criminalization.

5 Toulmin, Camilla and Bara Guèye. "Transformations in West African agriculture and the role of family farms." *International Institute for Environment and Development* 123. London: IIED, 2003. Available at: pubs.iied.org/pdfs/9309IIED.pdf.

6 GRAIN and AFSA. *Land and Seed Laws under Attack: Who is pushing changes in Africa?* Barcelona: GRAIN, 2015. Available at: www.grain.org/article/entries/5121-land-and-seed-laws-under-attack-who-is-pushing-changes-in-africa. For more information on land grabbing in Africa, please see: Seufert, Philip. "Tree Plantations and Land Grabbing in Niassa, Mozambique." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2013): 61–65. Available at: www.rfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rfn-watch.org/ENGLISH/pdf/Watch_2013/Watch_2013_PDFs/Watch_2013_eng_WEB_final.pdf#page=61.

7 FIAN International and FIAN Germany. *G8 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa: A Critical Analysis from a Human Rights Perspective*. Heidelberg: FIAN International, 2014. Available at: www.fian.org/fileadmin/media/publications/2014_G8NewAlliance_screen.pdf.

8 The Green Booklet is available in French at: www.grain.org/fr/article/entries/5416-caravane-ouest-africaine-droit-a-l-eau-et-a-la-terre-une-lutte-commune-3-19-mars-2016.

9 FAO. *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*. Rome: FAO, 2004. Available at: www.fao.org/3/a-y7937e.pdf.

10 FAO. *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security*. Rome: FAO, 2012. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/016/i2801e/t2801e.pdf.

11 African Union (AU), African Development Bank (AfDB) and Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). *Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa*. Addis-Abeba: AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium, 2010. Available at: www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/fg_on_land_policy_eng.pdf.

The caravan was composed of grassroots organizations and CSOs from twelve West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo). It departed from Burkina Faso, travelled through Mali and arrived in Senegal, stopping at eleven towns/cities along the way (Ouagadougou, Houndé and Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso; Bamako, Kayes and Sikasso in Mali; Diamniadio, Koalack, Mékhé, Tambacounda and Dakar in Senegal). All along the journey, people, organizations, movements, but also officials (governors, ministers and mayors, among others) participated in the activities. Depending on where they were taking place, debates, workshops and marches—but also field visits to areas that hold testimony to human rights violations—granted people a voice to appeal to officials who were present. Officials received the Green Booklet and in turn encouraged the initiative.

Upon its arrival in Dakar, the final destination, the caravan's closing event was marked with the handing over of the Green Booklet to Mr. Macky Sall, the president of Senegal, who was appointed as representative by the current president of ECOWAS and with an international conference of the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition. The caravan was a powerful moment, allowing for the creation of strong ties between countries and the strengthening of the movement at sub-regional level. The overall goal was to exert more pressure on institutions and governments to assert and secure community rights while promoting family farming based on peasant agroecology and food sovereignty. Such a struggle can only be built if there is solidarity with defenders of rights to land, water and seeds, who are constantly criminalized, be they community or social movement members.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

Strengthened by the success of this first action, the Convergence intends to continue pursuing its struggle. The loose coordination of the Convergence is already becoming more solid thanks to the creation of national platforms. We have to pave the way towards other actions that build on our common concerns and that enable us to influence decision-making at the governmental and institutional level. We propose credible solutions for achieving food sovereignty, family farming, and peasant agroecology, as well as the participation in decision-making processes that are linked to food, nutrition, and agriculture systems.

We are currently developing a program of common actions and establishing a warning system to support victims and activists who fight for our commons, the future of our planet and our humanity and yet are harassed, imprisoned and criminalized. We are not the criminals; we turn to the real criminals and say: "Do not touch my land, my home, my activists!"¹² Participants of the caravan have laid the first stone of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles in West Africa; however, it would not have been possible without the human and financial resources provided by international, sub-regional and national organizations and the dedication and sacrifice of activists.

It is primordial that other regions self-organize and converge, in order to amplify our actions, underpinned by our values, principles of analysis and proposals to build synergies across constituencies, as set out in the Dakar to Tunis Declaration,¹³ and broaden the West African perspective of our Green Booklet. Come and support the Convergence, join us at the next mobilizations, and, why not, let us organize together another caravan in 2018!

12 In French, CMAT's slogan is "Ne touche pas à ma terre, ma maison, mes militant-e-s." Please see: www.no-vox.org/spip.php?article304&lang=fr.

13 *Supra* note 4.