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Sierra Leone, land grabbing

Land grabbing in Sierra Leone

Introduction

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, the need for stable investments increased for parties such as states and multinational companies. The result was an intensification of the phenomenon known as land grabbing (Eriksson 2019). By buying or leasing land, investors can secure food and energy needs for a longer period. This usually occurs in developing countries with an already insecure food supply, among those Sierra Leone (FIAN et al.).

The country Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is located in West Africa (NE n.d.). The country's population as of July 2021 amounted to 6,807,277 people (Globalis 2021). In 2019, 41 percent of the country's inhabitants lived in cities, and the rest in rural areas (Utlandskonsulten et al.). Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries, and the economy rests mainly on agriculture and mining. The majority of the country's population live from subsistence farming and work primarily in the informal sector. However, the agricultural industry is undeveloped and some contributing factors are partly government set pricing on agricultural yields, partly high taxation on export crops. This has in turn resulted in less than 10 percent of the country's farmers growing export crops such as coffee and cocoa. Rice is an important consumption crop and is grown by around 75 percent of farmers (NE n.d.).

According to Transparency International's 2021 corruption index, Sierra Leone was awarded 34 points out of 100 possible (Transparency International 2022). In the parameter, a score of 0 corresponds to high corruption in the public sector, while 100 represents the opposite (Transparency International 2021). The country's high level of corruption exists in all levels of society, and therefore a law against money laundering was passed in 2005. However, the IMF and the World Bank have assessed that the law is not complied with and is practically ineffective. The constitution portrays the judiciary as independent, but is in fact deeply corrupt with ineffective courts. It is primarily politicians and well provided individuals who carry out the corruption (Landguiden 2021). Modern laws give women almost the same inheritance rights as men, but they are in practice treated like children. A woman who loses her husband risks losing all assets to his male relatives (Landguiden 2019). Abuse of women became illegal in 2007, but violence as well as sexual violence is still widespread. Due to Sierra Leone's patriarchal structures rape is regarded as a social problem rather than a crime. Women generally lack their own income and are most often financially dependent (NE et al.).

Challenges

Landgrabbing has proven to be a very lucrative business from a short-term perspective but does not take climate or the local population into consideration (FIAN et al.). The affected groups are primarily small farmers and indigenous people who are driven from their land and residences, sometimes under violent conditions. The arable land is a prerequisite for their income as well as survival, and in connection with its disappearance, the risk of starvation increases significantly. The land in question is usually inherited for generations without recognized documentation of ownership. This means that external parties such as multinational companies and states have free access to it since customary law is not recognized (Welthungerhilfe 2020). In addition to the mentioned groups, women are particularly vulnerable because they traditionally farm the land, but lack even the informal ownership rights that are usually assigned to men (Eriksson 2019). Another problem arising with land grabbing is the external parties tendency to carry out large-scale one-sided cultivation, where neither crop rotation nor recovery is taken into account. The outcome is depleted soil. Land grabbing can also be linked to consequences such as increased pollution and water shortages (FIAN et al.). The international holding company Socfin is an example of a corporation that practices land grabbing, and operates in several countries. In 2011, Socfin entered into a 50-year land lease agreement with Sierra Leone's government as well as local authorities, which was then followed by two more agreements. Within ten years, the forestry as well as agriculture around the town of Sahn Malen was transformed into thousands of hectares of monoculture palm oil cultivation (Schneider 2020).

Solutions

In the long term, the ambition should be to strengthen Sierra Leone's legislation and thereby clarify land rights. The weak social governance as well as the lack of compliance with the laws complicates such a first entry. Structural problems in the country means that the solution must be based on other starting points. Furthermore, the solution includes two parts, on one hand what can be done in Sierra Leone at the moment and on the other hand what the international community's responsibility is.

1. Solutions locally

A first step is solutions locally and at grassroots level. A large part of the problem is based on the local population's lack of rights and women's rights in particular. Historically, many changes of this kind have been rooted in people coming together and protesting. To enable this, natural meeting places are required where the population is given the opportunity to discuss the problem associated with land grabbing. The report *Citizen-driven meeting places in socio-economically vulnerable areas* from 2019 deals with the establishment of meeting places in vulnerable Swedish areas. A conclusion drawn is that the meeting places

contributed to strengthening the local democratization process. Furthermore, it is found to be a way of creating cohesion as well as enabling commitment and participation. It is a way for marginalized residents to mutually transform powerlessness into strength (Karlsson 2019). The research areas are different from a purely geographical perspective but the problems that the target groups face are nevertheless the same. Moreover, the establishment of natural meeting places in Sierra Leone could contribute to the problems being discussed. In order to especially integrate women into the process, communal dish racks can be established, as women are traditionally responsible for household chores. In this way, the women are given a context where they can discuss and reflect on the consequences of land grabbing. The solution may appear to be quite simple but is in fact incredibly powerful and does not require large monetary investments.

2. The international responsibility and the view of biofuels as renewable

In addition to the local population's opportunities for change, it is important to identify the underlying factors behind land grabbing. In Sierra Leone the reasons are primarily biofuels and palm oil. Biofuels is an all encompassing term for fuel made from organic material. They function as energy carriers from which energy can be extracted (WWF et al.). Palm oil is a vegetable fat extracted from the fruit of the oil palm, and suitable for being turned into biofuels (Wikipedia 2021). In the light of a changing climate the demand for renewable forms of energy has increased, and palm oil has been a prominent substitute for fossil fuel for cars and trucks. However, it has been established that palm oil can be three times as detrimental to the climate, and thus have the opposite effect for the climate than the benefits that are sought (Naturskyddsforeningen 2021).

The high demand has also given rise to a trend where countries such as Sierra Leone with inadequate land rights have become particularly vulnerable to expropriation. Land agreements, which as a rule aim at the production of biofuels by external parties, are entered into between states and companies. The local population are excluded from negotiations, their interests and rights are not taken into account. Furthermore, palm oil production is seen by many governments in developing countries as an opportunity for foreign investments, jobs and economic growth. The intended effect has rarely coincided with the result, it has instead led to the replacement of food production, small-scale farming and tropical forests in favor for large plantations of among other things oil palm. (Naturskyddsforeningen 2014:21). There are many negative long term effects for the country's future opportunities in agriculture. Palm oil plantations cause soil changes and the hydrological impact has extensive consequences for food production. When the land is exposed to these changes, the emission of greenhouse gasses increases at the same time. Thus, palm oil could probably be the crop that has the most devastating effect on biological diversity (Naturskyddsforeningen 2014:22).

Land grabbing and its consequences gives reason to question the view of biofuels as a renewable form of energy with a positive effect on the climate. There, one needs to distinguish between different raw materials and the effects of production. However, biofuels do not have to be negative. It depends on the production. For example, manufacturing that utilizes waste and agricultural residues has proven to be positive from a climate perspective (WWF et al.). Clearer regulations and directives that are implemented and supervised are required for biofuels. The raw material or production approach that does not correspond to a sustainability criteria must therefore stop being classified as renewable.

Conclusion

Sierra Leone faces difficult challenges in many respects. The prerequisites for the country's positive growth are not clear, but with the right efforts it is not impossible. By establishing communal meeting places, opportunities arise for the population to discuss and involve themselves in issues related to land grabbing. When special focus is placed on women, the most vulnerable group, they are given an opportunity to strengthen their influence in society. At the same time, the international community is required to increase its responsibility regarding land grabbing, and especially its incentives, which in this context are biofuels. The concept of biofuels as renewable must be questioned, and a distinction must be made between different raw materials and production methods. The actual effects of the entire process for the local population as well as the climate must be weighed together. Clearer regulations and directives are required on a global level regarding biofuels where production and raw materials are required. This would mean an end to the devastating consequences of land grabbing.

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