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Extractivism, exclusion and conflicts in Senegal's agro-industrial transformation

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, the promotion of agro-industry has become a dominant developmental imperative on the African continent, leading to efforts to involve private-sector actors. This article examines the political economy and ecology of agro-industry in the Senegal River delta, focusing on local-level reactions to Senegalese initiatives aimed at attracting foreign investors in agriculture. The argument is that Senegal is witnessing the emergence of an agro-extractivist pattern that replaces earlier development objectives – such as peasants' integration into the national economy – with the new imperative of the integration of territories into global capitalism. The article presents empirical evidence on three main consequences of the increased presence of agro-industry: a process of change in land property and access; the end of public support to peasant farmers; and an intensified marginalisation of pastoralism. Colonial heritage and the role of local resistances in shaping and mediating this developmental strategy are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Senegal; extractivism; land-grabbing; agro-industry; pastoralism; peasants

MOTS-CLÉS

Sénégal ; extractivisme ; accaparement des terres ; agro-industrie ; pastoralisme ; paysans

Extractivisme, exclusion et conflits dans la transformation agro-industrielle au Sénégal

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, la promotion de l'agro-industrie est devenue un impératif de développement dominant sur le continent africain, ce qui a conduit à des efforts importants pour impliquer les acteurs du secteur privé. Cet article examine l'économie et l'écologie politiques de l'agro-industrie dans le delta du fleuve Sénégal, en mettant l'accent sur les réactions au niveau local aux initiatives sénégalaises visant à attirer les investisseurs étrangers dans l'agriculture nationale. L'argument soutenu est que le Sénégal assiste effectivement à l'émergence d'un modèle agro-extractiviste qui remplace les objectifs de développement antérieurs - tels que l'intégration des paysans dans l'économie nationale - avec le nouvel impératif d'intégration des territoires dans le capitalisme mondial. L'article présente des données empiriques sur les trois principales conséquences de la présence accrue de l'agro-industrie : un processus de transformation du régime foncier et des pratiques d'accès à la terre ; la fin du soutien public aux paysans ; et une marginalisation du

pastoralisme intensifiée. L'héritage colonial et les rôles des résistances locales dans l'élaboration et la médiation de cette stratégie de développement sont également abordés.

Introduction

In February 2014, the Senegalese president Macky Sall paid an official visit to the Senegal River's delta region, in the north-east of Senegal, in the Sahel region (hereafter referred to as 'the delta'). During this visit, the newly elected president urged local residents to 'provide agribusinesses with the opportunity to exploit the lands owned by family farmers (A. C. Diop 2014) and argued that 'handing down lands for millennia, without having the means to put them into effective production' was a useless pursuit (*Ibid.*). The president concluded his speech by urging the local population to collaborate with investors, arguing that while 'family farming certainly needs to be protected', it was necessary 'also to go beyond this stage in order to move towards modern agriculture in such a way that both protects families and enables our country to reach self-sufficiency in cereals' (*Ibid.*).

The choice to make this speech in the delta was not without reason. Since national independence, this region has been designated as a preferred location for Senegal's food sovereignty policies, which revolve around rice production (RoS 2009). Since the early 2000s, due to its richness in water sources, this region has received widespread attention in national and global development strategies aimed at promoting commercial agriculture by stimulating agro-industrial investments (World Bank 2013; MCA-RoS Compact 2010). Some of these investments have entailed large-scale land transfers and generated local claims against land-grabbing (Benegiamo 2020).¹ Although many new investments have been withdrawn and many others have been only partially implemented – a common trend in recent land deals (Nolte, Wytke, and Markus 2016) – they represent a substantial change in Senegal's agrarian landscape. Except for a limited number of firms, Senegal has never had a prosperous private agro-industry sector based on large-scale commercial private estates. According to data provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), agro-industry in Senegal employs only 1% of the working population on 5% of arable land, while 60% of the national labour force is occupied in family farming and cultivates per capita plots averaging 0.25 hectares (FAO and IFC 2016). While the number of Senegalese agro-exporters in the fresh fruit and vegetable sector has grown since the 1970s (Baglioni 2015), this trend is limited to a few regions, and has not led to transformation for peasant farmers who remain mostly independent from international supply chains (Maertens and Swinnen 2009; Baglioni 2015).

Against this background, the president's declarations sounded like a particularly detailed summary of the dynamics currently at work in the delta's agrarian transformation: the changing patterns of land control and the contested place of peasant farmers in the broader modernising vision aiming at a transition towards industrialised, large-scale agriculture. Expanding on these questions, this article seeks to critically examine the political economy and ecology of the current development phase as it emerges in Senegal. It draws insights from six months of ethnographic research conducted in the

delta region between 2013 and 2015 by focusing on the local level, more particularly on the reactions by local residents affected by new agro-industrial projects. It evidences a shift in Senegalese development policies towards an agrarian-extractivist pattern that displaces development objectives from peasant integration into the national economy to territories' integration into the global circuits of capital (Ferguson 2006; Ong 2006). Accordingly, the prioritisation of production of export-oriented, high-value-added crops entails a tacit demise of public support for peasant farmers and the potential dispossession and displacement of semi-itinerant pastoral communities from the delta region. This is in line with current global approaches to food security (FAO 2009; G8 2009) that are redrawing Senegal's own approach to self-sufficiency, as explained by the presidential speech. Earlier development paradigms revolving around public support to peasants are thus replaced by public support to agro-industry. While such dynamics are representative of the exclusion dynamics at stake in the global political economy of development under neoliberal globalisation (Sassen 2010; Li 2010), the article also stresses their colonial roots and the role of local resistance in shaping and mediating this developmental strategy in Senegal.

After a short methodological introduction, the first section addresses the constitutive role that agriculture holds in contemporary capitalism under the neoliberal development project, understood as a process of accumulation through dispossession and exclusion. The second section focuses on four decades of agrarian policies and the resulting trajectory of agrarian development in the Senegal River's delta, explaining how it shifted away from peasant farmers towards private investors as ideal developmental actors. The third section introduces the case study of a large-scale land agreement targeting pastoral lands, analysing local reactions against the historical-geographical background of the delta's agrarian change and the transformations led by the World Bank Sustainable and Inclusive Agribusiness Project (PDIDAS). The last section argues that primary evidence on public support to agro-industry in Senegal highlights the extractive character of this process which is engendering vast dispossession, as it reorganises land relations at the spatial, symbolic and normative levels, promoting a development model based on exclusion which reproduces and exasperates the impacts of earlier colonial and post-colonial models.

Methodological note

In the absence of public information, the evidence is composed of primary and secondary data collected between 2013 and 2015, including 43 in-depth interviews with local informants, company representatives and employees, local elected officials, political representatives, technicians from the state civil service and representatives of the main donor agencies then active in the region. In addition, four focus groups with local residents were conducted. Part of this evidence has been presented before (Benegiamo and Cirillo 2014, 2015). The analysis of local impacts and reactions is based on ethnographic data collected between 2013 and 2015 in the Ndiaël reserve. Interviews were carried out in Pulaar (Fulani language) and transcribed with the help of a professional translator. Additional primary data were collected at a later stage, through long-distance communication with key informants, and integrated with secondary data, though triangulation was not possible after the conclusion of fieldwork in 2015.

The place of agriculture in neoliberal development

In the aftermath of the 2007–08 food and financial crises, a significant rise in land-based investments was experienced worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africa had the largest percentage of registered deals (Nolte, Wytske, and Markus 2016), which occurred at a pace unprecedented since decolonisation. Although export-oriented, large-scale farming is not an unprecedented phenomenon, the drivers, patterns and geographies of the new land rush reflect the contemporary phase of global capitalism, marked by the sharpening of contradictions in the neoliberal socio-ecological regime. Investments display the food regime attempts to integrate key socio-economic and environmental issues into a broader strategy to relaunch the accumulation process (McMichael 2012). They also denote a further stage of globalisation (Sassen 2013) characterised by an increasingly integrated global food–energy–climate nexus (Margulis, McKeon and Borrás 2013) and the acceleration of territorial integration into global markets.

The place occupied by agriculture in global capitalism is also mirrored by the attention it suddenly regained in the aftermath of the post-2007–08 food price hikes, which set the context for new global development guidelines (McKeon 2011). These repropounded the old trope of transforming African peasant farming into input-intensive commercial agriculture through the promotion of agricultural value chains but also emphasised the promotion of investments in agro-industrial production. Global development guidelines depicted the agro-industry sector as a primary engine for Africa's growth and as a strategy to address global issues (World Bank 2007; Deininger and Byerlee 2011; Miyazako and Syed 2013; Olaoye 2014). The long-standing decline in development funding (OECD-DAC 2010) and the impact of the global economic crisis on the capacity of governments to finance public programmes all contributed to this shift towards private-sector-led development. As Raj Patel noted, this replaced previous approaches based on public subsidies while placing a strong emphasis on the 'fungibility of land as a *sine qua non* of agricultural progress' (Patel 2013, 43).

This changing scenario raises central questions concerning the political economy of this phase of developmental transformation. Since independence, in Senegal peasant farming has been at the core of the development imperative of self-sufficiency, marking a continuity between rural socialist programmes (Mbodj 1993) and the Washington Consensus period, when the idea of self-sufficiency began to align with a food security approach. Leaving aside critical considerations, which will be addressed later regarding the capacities, political will and effectiveness of past development policies to eradicate structural conditions of poverty and inequality, national development narratives have thus far been built on the promise of integrating small farming systems in the national economy (Cruise O'Brien 1992). Over time, this has translated into ideas of agrarian development as a state-building and a nation-building project through modernisation, insistence on increasing productivity and a focus on farming systems' resilience and capability to face market risks and ensure food provision. The new development vision adopted by the international donor community breaks with the past by assuming that small-scale farmers are not capable of integration into the development process unless they transition towards agribusiness (World Bank 2007; Williams and Karen 2019) yet, if incapable of doing so, they should make way for private investors.

The developmental project has historically represented the political aspects of capitalist expansion in post-colonial contexts. Senegal is an example where the developmental project (McMichael 2006) presented itself as the bearer of the capitalist-modernisation project (Scott 1998) aimed at creating a citizen-worker for whom access to socio-political rights occurred through inclusion in the national economy. Proletarianisation and market integration were the premises on which nation-states built their legitimacy. In this sense, the 'development state' relied on a logic which was similar to that of the European democratic welfare state (Neilson and Mezzadra 2014), where welfare entitlements were conditional on labour and participation in national growth. In contrast to that, contemporary neoliberal dynamics have done away with the idea of economic development as a monolithic project of unification and inclusion to be reached through different and subsequent stages of economic expansion and growth (Sidaway 2007). Neoliberal development paradigms propose differential arrangements of economic expansion and social exclusion in which inhabitants and territories are discontinuously and unevenly connected to globally defined economic circuits (Ferguson 2006; Ong 2006). This entails the opportunity for inclusion in local development dynamics for some, while entailing for many others minimal involvement with the economic expansion affecting their territories (Li 2010). This is particularly true for many rural areas in the global South, where development increasingly takes the form of 'excluding through dispossessing': the process of accumulating natural resources while reproducing a population whose labour and consumption are made superfluous to the needs of capital.

In this context, neoliberal agricultural modernisation has also been referred to as agro-extractivism to indicate a mode of extensive export-oriented farming that requires little or no industrial processing and is therefore scarcely linked with the surrounding regional economy (McKay 2017). Agro-extractivism reorganises space, and extractive spaces tend to build on and retrace colonial geography, both inside and between national territories (Svampa 2013). Rooted in this colonial legacy, the establishment of an extractivist-oriented economy has been firmly promoted under the neoliberal expansion of global commodity frontiers (Moore 2000) associated with a phase of capitalist orientation towards even greater accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003). The same notion of extractivism emerged in South and Central American debates on the reprimarisation of the region's economies since the 1990s, in which the transition to a neoliberal phase was marked by greater dependence on raw material exports. This process required the deregulation of environmental and land governance (Sikor et al. 2013) and has been accompanied by a rise in socio-ecological conflicts (Martinez-Alier and Walter 2016). Moreover, as outlined by Omar Felipe Giraldo (2015) for the South American context, the corporate-controlled agro-industrial model appropriates spaces not only through the enclosure of land but also through the disembedding of local ties to territories. It promotes the loss of farmers' cultural and symbolic control over their practices that become increasingly defined by top-down development policies or are made incompatible with the transformed landscape and the land-use planning.

At the same time, and as Wolford et al. (2013, 7) have pointed out, 'land-deals have no necessary character' and the general nature of the label 'land-grab' risks obfuscating the heterogeneity of recent land deals whose structures, behaviours and local reactions may vary widely. With Sanyal (2014), the development process is marked by heterogeneity and unevenness as the category of development designates a particular political space

within the capitalist accumulation process. Economic development is never disconnected from the social context, and the forms it takes are not established but are the result of multiple clashes. This also implies that a radical political economy of development may not limit itself to address development as the depoliticised version of the modernising neoliberal project. Development is rather the name that this conflictual space takes in the post-colonial context.

To understand the political economy of the current phase of development and bring out the fractures around which power relations are reorganised and contested, the following section retraces the evolution of Senegal's development policies, focusing on the delta region. Without rehearsing the well-documented history of challenges and failures in Senegal's past agrarian policies, the section delineates the gradual shift from small-scale farmers to agro-industry as the ideal development actors. Local reactions are then examined, focusing on the social contradictions underlying economic development and how this has been reorganising socio-ecological relationships in the delta.

Senegalese agrarian development from independence to the 2000s

The socialist state and the cooperative movement

In the early 1960s, inspired by the vision of African socialism promoted by the first Senegalese president, Leopold Senghor, the recently independent government embraced the idea of a state-led development strategy. Centred on the primacy of the agrarian sector, developmental policies pursued a project of national unification with the objective of merging production management with wide-ranging social goals and the state's ambition to establish firm control over rural areas (Mbodj 1993). Focused on the role of agricultural extensions, these development policies presupposed a 'strengthening through modernisation' approach, where national development entailed supporting individual livelihoods through the protection of people's access to natural resources. Farmers' cooperatives, introduced during the colonial period, played a central role in this vision of national development, rapidly growing in number over the first decades of independence. Cooperatives were conceived as the main tool for assimilating peasants into the process of national development; they had access to public credit and received subsidised inputs from parastatal agencies that were also committed to buying the harvest at a controlled price. Through cooperatives, the state could intervene in the rural context to protect local producers and stimulate production while administrating the main aspects of rural life, such as public health and education. However, this holistic vision of peasants' participation in rural development was not effective, and cooperatives tended to function mainly as a tool to gain or preserve state control over rural areas (Mbodj 1993).

A similar logic inspired the land reform prompted by the National Domain Law in 1964, which declared the nationalisation of approximately 95% of the Senegalese territory, including almost all rural lands (Hesseling 2009). Under the National Domain Law, which is still in place, land can be accessed through use rights conferred by local rural authorities. Defined as the base of an African theory of common property (Le Roy 2011), the land reform did not achieve the full replacement of customary land rights and resulted in a decrease of the authority of traditional local authorities over land, due to their incorporation into the new power structures (Faye 2008).

The Senegalese socialist vision was also informed by a technocratic developmentalist approach (Oya 2006) rooted in the colonial legacy that largely ignored indigenous knowledge, farming systems and tenure arrangements. The post-colonial history of the delta provides a useful example. Already in the 1960s classified as a ‘pioneer area’ (Decree 1965-53, see RoS 1965), namely an uninhabited residual territory suitable to host development projects, the delta was the object of top-down state interventions to establish large-scale rice farms given that rice is the Senegalese staple food (Diagne 1974). The building of dams and canals enabled the enclosure of fertile lands – *walo* in the Wolof and Fulani languages – which are located near the Senegal River and its tributaries. Large-scale irrigated perimeters replaced traditional local economies based on itinerant pastoralism and seasonal flood farming (Hervouët 1971). Semi-nomadic Fulani herders were forced to migrate towards the sandy hinterlands – *djeri* in Wolof and Fulani – or adapt through conversion to more integrated agro-pastoralism (Tourrand 2000). Meanwhile, a state-owned company – the Société Nationale d’Aménagement et d’Exploitation (SAED) – planned the settlement of 9000 families from other regions of Senegal, and grouped them into cooperatives which were allocated irrigated farmland for cultivation (*Ibid.*). Throughout the 1970s, fixed prices and the promotion of both irrigation infrastructures and cooperatives were key rural development policy interventions aiming at the expansion of arable lands and the increase of small-scale farmers’ productivity. However, technical, organisational and environmental constraints led to unsatisfactory harvests and increased farmers’ debts (Seck 1981).

The Washington Consensus: between liberalisation and the expansion of small-scale farming

At the end of the 1970s, a changing global economy coupled with the unsatisfactory performance of national agrarian policies worsened Senegal’s level of external debt. In 1980, Senegal was the first sub-Saharan African country to sign an economic reform agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implement the World Bank’s structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). With the aim of correcting the disequilibrium in the balance of payments, Senegal was required to downsize and privatise state-owned enterprises and abolish price controls. The SAP prescriptions were reflected in the New Agricultural Policy (RoS 1984) which dictated the withdrawal of the state from training organisations and the reform of the cooperative movement, and were further developed by the programmes, letters and declarations of agricultural policy between 1995 and 2005 (Duruflé 1995). These reforms of the cooperative system gave greater autonomy and accountability to local producers (Dahou 2008), prioritising a specific typology of farmers’ groups – the Economic Interest Grouping – which differ from cooperatives because they can apply for bank loans and acquire licences to trade.

During this period, a new development approach emerged to fill the gaps left by the state’s withdrawal. These were predominantly framed by a market-based food security approach and aligned with the ongoing large-scale Integrated Rural Development Projects of the 1980s (Chambers 1983) funded by World Bank loans and now remembered as colossal development failures (Baah-Dwomoh 2016). Once again the delta region was taken as an example of development efforts, with projects aiming at reducing farmers’ vulnerability and strengthening food security by increasing productivity and resilience and

diversifying rural livelihoods and incomes (Drèze and Sen 1989; Cammack 2004). Enabled by decentralisation reforms that transferred land management to local governments, grassroots peasant organisations in the delta succeeded in accessing new land. Arable land more than doubled between 1980 and 1991 (SAED 2011), largely in favour of local elites, which resulted in the proliferation of private irrigation schemes based on family farming (Mathieu, Niasse, and Vincke 1986). This process of land-use change and reorganisation of land access converted hinterland pastures to irrigated farmland, further marginalising the semi-nomadic pastoral groups in the region (Tourrand 2000). At the same time as the economic burden of rice cultivation and commercialisation was transferred to small farmers, local producers experienced considerable difficulties in cultivating the new plots, and faced competition from rice imports (Sourisseau 1996). Peasant exposure to rice imports worsened in the 1990s, as France and the European Union decided to devalue the West African CFA franc while Senegal liberalised the rice sector to comply with the directives of the World Trade Organization (Oya 2006). In the delta and throughout the Senegal valley, farmers' indebtedness and migration increased as a response to the crisis in rice farming (Koopman 2012).

Promoting agro-industry in the Senegal River delta

The new millennium coincided with the end of the Washington Consensus and the move to a new set of policies designed mainly under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative of the IMF and the World Bank. The two Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of 2001 and 2007 (RoS 2002; IMF 2007) that Senegal submitted to the IMF set the objective of reducing poverty through enhancing growth. This goal was subsequently quantified by the national development vision adopted in 2012 – the *Plan Sénégal Emergent* (RoS 2014) – which targeted an annual growth rate of 7% during the 2014–2018 period and identified the agrarian sector as the driving force of economic growth.² To achieve this target, Senegal enacted its National Agricultural Investment Plan (RoS 2010) and created a one-stop agency with the aim of assisting, orienting and facilitating foreign investors targeting the agro-industry sector. In 2006 and 2007, former president Abdoulaye Wade (2000–2012) also launched two ambitious programmes, Great Push Forward for Agriculture, Food, and Abundance (GOANA) and Return to Agriculture (REVA), to exhort local administrations in charge of rural land attribution to earmark a minimum of 1000 hectares each for the establishment of commercial agricultural projects and large-scale industrial farms (Faye et al. 2011; FAO 2015).³ Under this framework, land allocation to large investors, both national and international, accelerated. The National Council for Rural Cooperation (CNCR), the main Senegalese peasant organisation, protested against this move, denouncing the government's intention to promote agriculture without farmers (Faye et al. 2011).

Senegalese programmes were framed both as a response to the 2007–08 food and energy crises that caused popular mobilisations and urban food riots in Senegal (Antil 2010) and as a way to counter the rural exodus of the youth by creating rural jobs. However, as outlined in the 2004 Agri-Sylvo-Pastoral Orientation Law (RoS 2004), the core idea behind these programmes was to foster a two-speed agrarian economy, facilitating a slow modernisation of peasant farming while creating a fast lane alongside, that is, an agro-industry led by large investors producing high-value-added food and fuel crops

mainly for export. A similar pattern was proposed for livestock breeding, with explicit consideration of the desirability of suppressing the way of life of semi-itinerant pastoralist groups (Ancey and Monas 2005).

The delta region emerged as the main target of these strategies. In 2012, a survey (D'Aquino and Seck 2013, 309) highlighted that in the previous 10 years – but mainly in 2007 and 2008 – 20 agro-industrial projects had been initiated by national investors (50%) and foreign investors (50%). Primarily interested in horticulture and agrofuel production, these investments covered a total of 58,000 hectares, of which only about 35% had been put into production at the time of the study (*Ibid.*). By 2013, four had been withdrawn, and one was expected to fail, while no further information was available on the other projects.

Questioning the agro-industrial turn

The Senhuile-Senethanol investment

Started in 2010, the Italian-Senegalese joint venture Senhuile-Senethanol rapidly captured public attention (Addamah 2011; Afrique en ligne 2011; Leral.net 2012) because of the size of its land concession – 20,000 hectares – which led to protests and conflicts at the local level. The main objective of the project was producing agrofuel and sunflower seeds to feed the biomass power plants of the Italian investor. The investment, initially located in the Fanaye municipality, was suspended in November 2011 by President Wade due to violent clashes between local politicians and the project's opponents that caused the deaths of two people (PressAfrik 2011). This tragic event had heavy consequences for the community of Fanaye, where the town hall was destroyed, and for the families of the victims who were left to mourn their dead (Benegiamo and Cirillo 2014). This illustrates that the impact of the land deals did not simply end when they were withdrawn. In April 2012, President Wade decided to relocate the investment to the Ndiaël Avifauna Special Reserve (NASR) in the south-west of the delta, thus using protected land for agro-industrial purposes. In order to do so, the protected status of the NASR had to be downgraded through a land allocation by presidential decree, granting a 55-year renewable lease. The downgrading of the protected status and the relocation of the investment were formalised through two presidential decrees on the same day, 20 March 2012 (RoS 2012a, 2012b).

The NASR owes its name to a vast depression known as the Ndiaël, which was excluded from the land concession as it is an international protected wetland, listed under the Ramsar Convention since 1977.⁴ In the 1960s, due to the isolation of the Ndiaël from seasonal water flows, the reserve gradually dried out, but it remained an important resource for herders. The NASR is one of the last open-access pastoral lands in the delta which has not been converted to agriculture. It is a crucial resource for pastoral livelihoods because it provides key resources – trees, seasonal ponds and water sources – without which pastoralism would not be practicable. The conversion of this reserve to farming is a huge loss for pastoralist groups, as it threatens the viability of pastoral activities in the delta and erodes the livelihoods of the local Fulani residents.

The Fulani are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Sahel and West Africa, and their livelihoods continue to be largely devoted to nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism

(Dupire 1962; C. Ba 1986). Semi-nomadic pastoralism is also among the main economic activities of the Sahelian areas, where fragile ecologies rely heavily on the flexibility of pastoral systems. Here, itinerant pastoralism is practised by between 70% and 90% of Sahelian herds (Cesaro, Magrin, and Ninot 2010). The presence of Fulani groups in the delta probably pre-dates the colonial period (Hervouët 1971; C. Ba 1986). The specific toponomy of the Ndiaël testifies to this long-standing territorial belonging, which is reinforced through the transmission of oral culture, such as songs and tales that shed light on the history of the Fulani. The following is an extract from an interview conducted in the village of K., with a woman aged 103, according to her voting card:

I remember Thiaski, I remember Thiamalé, I remember Bebal, I remember Tiayodé, I remember all these ponds. I used to graze the cows and take my animals there ... we'd bring milk to Ndarr [the indigenous name for Saint Louis], to Pal, to Sakal, we'd also bring it to Thiehele, and we'd trade it for millet ... Our herding was better before. Now the cows have nothing because they put the powder in the fields, they cultivate the land, and since then our animals hardly make milk anymore. (Personal communication no. 1, November 2014)

Despite the historical presence of Fulani villages in the Ndiaël, the NASR's classification as a protected area in 1965 was mostly intended to conserve wildlife and birds as a compensatory measure for the conversion of two other delta wetlands into agricultural perimeters (RoS 1965), and to preserve the hunting activities conducted in the area by European hunters. This is consistent with the general disregard for pastoralism by development policies in the delta (Santoir 1983) – a process similar to that of other wetlands and rice-farming areas in many African countries (Bernstein, Hulme, and Woodhouse 2000). It also explains the contradictory measures in the classification decree, which allowed the use of forests by local herders and preserved their traditional grazing paths but did not recognise customary land rights, thus prohibiting the legal recognition of human settlements in the area. This created a contradictory situation, because over the last 50 years there have been settled villages in the area. While revealing a chronic legal uncertainty, this process is tolerated by local authorities, as attested to by the presence of schools staffed with national teachers, collection of taxes and involvement in local institutional life.

Villages were not represented in the land allocation plans provided by the government, nor were they fully involved in opaque negotiations conducted between Senhuile and national and local administrative representatives (Benegiamo and Cirillo 2014). The settlement model, characterised by hamlets located at significant distances from one another to allow sufficient movement for cattle, supported ongoing narratives about the existence of empty and idle lands. When the information went public, herders gathered in a collective informal institution, the Collective of the Villages of the Ndiaël, later renamed Collective for the Defence of the Ndiaël, to oppose the project, denouncing the lack of information and the absence of a fair consultation process. Given the overlap between the project's area and pastoral lands, representatives of the Fulani villages located within the reserve argued that project implementation would cause herders to be evicted from their homes and displaced, losing access to pasture lands and water ponds which are crucial for cattle-keeping, as well as to their cemeteries, places of worship and schools.

The central government invoked public interest as the criterion that legitimised land dispossession in the NASR (RoS 2012a); and it addressed local opposition by criminalising the protests, and by ignoring the pastoral claims (Ferloo 2013; C. L. Diop 2014). Meanwhile, production targets had changed between 2013 and 2016. Unable to grow sunflower due to technical and ecological constraints, the project experimented with the introduction of new crops, including rice, peanuts and maize, possibly to demonstrate the ability to put the land into production and preclude accusations of inefficiency (Benegiamo and Cirillo 2015). Senhuile company representatives declared that they were reorienting production towards the domestic market in order to ‘support the Senegalese government in obtaining self-sufficiency in rice and thus make Senhuile one of the major producers in Senegal’ (Ndar Info 2015a).⁵ However, project management proved ineffective, and the farm never reached its full productive capacity. In 2017 the combination of increasing local hostility to the project and the company’s incapacity to put land into production led the Italian investor to abandon the project, selling its shares to the Senegalese associate (Ndar Info 2017). Since then, no further advances have been made in the exploitation of the concession nor is it possible to confirm who is in possession of the Senhuile shares. On the ground, the withdrawal of the Italian investor has not meant a return to the previous situation. The firm engaged in a deep restructuring of the area, including extensive tree clearance and the building of long water canals from the nearby Lake Guiers. This has had an ongoing impact on pastoral activities, restricting grazing routes (GRAIN 2019) and posing a safety risk, as people and cattle are known to have drowned in the unfenced canals (Ndar Info 2015b). Besides, the land is still under the control of the state as a result of the downgrading of the protected status of the reserve, while government agencies are pursuing other business ventures with new investors. A new company – Les Fermes de la Téranga, allegedly a shell company – has taken over the 20,000 hectares that had once been allocated to Senhuile but, apparently due to a corruption scandal, production has not taken off (GRAIN 2019).

Pastoral resistance

While civil society organisations and villages from the area joined the mobilisation against Senhuile, their opposition to its activities was patchy and variable; the mobilisation became more widespread mainly as a result of the activities of the Collective for the Defence of the Ndiaël, formed by the 37 villages and hamlets within the reserve. It has been already observed that ‘political reactions from below’ to land-grabbing can assume different forms (Hall et al. 2015), highlighting local differences in class, gender and status, and include attempts to obtain greater guarantees or inclusions in the land deals. Moreover, processes of dispossession often reproduce patterns of internal colonialism which are at play in the territories in which they operate (Maldonado-Torres 2016). In past development phases, state and donors alike have misrepresented Fulani pastoral groups as backward, anti-developmental subjects, thus reinforcing the stigmatisation that has prevailed since colonial times, which has led to the marginalisation of pastoral groups and their political isolation. This pejorative narrative has reappeared in the current private-led developmentalist rhetoric as, under the banner of ‘modernisation’ of pastoral groups, private investors have stated their willingness to support programmes to sedentarise them and intensify their cattle-keeping activities. However, it should be noted that sedentarisation

and intensification respond to the current context of increasing land scarcity and ongoing land dispossession suffered by pastoral groups. Similarly, the different local reactions to this land-grabbing case are better understood against the background of increased land scarcity and reduced land access. Early in the fieldwork, the peasants farming around the Senhuile land concession complained about the land concession but acknowledged the benefits accruing from the presence of private investors, such as the expansion of arable land and the creation of new water canals. This position would change later on, due to the conflict between the investor and the pastoral groups. At the same time, the large-scale land dispossession caused by Senhuile and the state also engendered division within the pastoral community of the delta. For example, a group of Fulani villagers that was settled on the actual border of the Senhuile farm decided to temporarily abandon the protest and engaged in negotiation with the company management, which promised land concessions for farming, jobs and other benefits. This group represents a form of more socially integrated and sedentary agro-pastoralism and has a different position to that of other Fulani groups living in the NASR, whose livelihoods revolve more around cattle-keeping and for whom agriculture is a marginal activity. These cattle-keeping Fulani groups are the ones who established the Collective for the Defence of the Ndiaël and whose claims have gained a worldwide resonance.⁶

The initial reaction of peasant farmers can be traced back to the subordination of pastoral lands to agriculture, inserted in the historical dynamic of agrarian change that began with colonial rule and which created divisions and conflicts between herders and farmers – a common consequence of many Sahelian development plans (Santoir 1983; Tourrand 2000). To fully understand pastoral reactions to the agricultural conversion of the Ndiaël, we should place this event in the context of the different trajectories of the Fulani herders in facing the progressive enclosure of pastoral lands located near the river and its tributaries. The ethnographic work, spatial analysis of the lineages and comparison with other research (e.g. Corniaux et al. 1998; Tourrand 2000) enable an understanding of these trajectories in terms of divergent land and water access strategies.

The lineages that historically controlled lands and grazing paths in the *walo* saw their participation in a public agricultural scheme as a way to preserve their control over land, even if this meant a necessary transition towards sedentary practices. In contrast, those groups whose traditional grazing lands and transhumance routes were primarily located in the south-west of the region were drastically excluded from the public agricultural scheme and thus found themselves marginalised and excluded from the development process. Both the distance from the irrigation schemes and the difficulty in accessing the river pushed them towards maintaining extensive use of grazing lands and longer transhumance routes. These resistance strategies are still ongoing. The groups that practise more integrated and sedentary agro-pastoralism are more interested in negotiating their participation in the investment, while the groups living in the Ndiaël, who are more dependent on cattle-keeping, oppose the investment and refuse negotiation. By maintaining a predominantly pastoral orientation, the Ndiaël villagers, mostly belonging to the *Woodaabe* lineage, were also interested in preserving some traditional features of pastoralism and of *Woodaabe* culture and values that are at the basis of the Fulani's cosmivision. The latter conceives of a specific relationship between the herders, the 'traditional cows' whose breeding is part of the lineage ties, and the *ladde*, which is the Fulani name for the open Sahelian savanna. The *ladde* covers multiple functions in Fulani societies

(Ciavolella 2010) and represents a primary source of life, standing as a ‘vital’ space precisely because it covers the non-domestic space outside the village. By crossing the bush-grasslands, cows can access good pasture and thus provide large quantities of milk, which is a central resource for Fulani pastoralism and to the ways in which *Woo-daabe* relate to the Sahelian territories and their animals. The enclosure of the Ndiaël is at once a dramatic event and the expression of an ongoing, long-standing crisis of pastoral ecologies, as underlined by one informant:

What made our life possible was milk ... since agriculture was not practised much, our strength resided in livestock farming. The strength of livestock farming resided in milk From the time when the *ladde* started to shrink due to the expansion of farming activities, milk production from the animals began to fall, and our problems started from that moment. (Personal communication no. 2, November 2014)

To fully understand this, we should bear in mind the correlation between cows’ movement and their milk yield: according to the herders interviewed, restricting cows’ grazing area affects their capacity to produce milk. This correlation was also proven in Colin de Verdière’s study on Niger pastoralism (1995), and lay behind the following statement:

They [the development planners] think that the breeding must be industrial, but we, for our part, also think. And what we think is that the breeding is in the *ladde* and it does not consist in tying up the cows here or there. (Personal communication no. 3, October 2014)

And also:

Livestock farming is our *projet* ... If they [the planners] didn’t see the advantages of this activity, we certainly did. (Personal communication no. 4, November 2014)

The use of the French word *projet* is significant in this context. Indeed, *projet* is a word deeply embedded in the developmentalist narrative; invariably, the Senhuile-Senethanol investment and other land deals in the delta are referred to as *projets*. Counter-use of the term highlights the political economy of exclusion in the delta’s top-down development policies.

The action undertaken by the Collective for the Defence of Ndiaël is not limited to refusal. It also involves a proactive stance based on the will to pursue an alternative development pattern rooted in the ecological, economic and moral concerns of the Fulani communities of the Ndiaël, which motivate their choice of itinerant pastoralism conducted on an extensive area of land and involving restrained livestock sales. This pattern is deeply rooted in the community’s concern with the sustainability of not just this place but also their way of life. As stated by a woman in the Ndiaël during a focus group:

What frightens us is not so much our fate as that of our children and grandchildren: the Fulani people live off pastoralism. If the project continues, pastoralism will disappear from the region. That really hurts us. (Focus group no. 3, April 2014)

Ndiaël villages are demanding and proposing alternatives, which led them to obtain access to land for fodder during the dry season. The decree assigning 20,000 hectares to Senhuile-Senhetanol stated that an area of 6550 hectares should be devoted to the inhabitants of the rural communities of Ronkh and Ngith for the resettlement of villages that may have to be displaced. However, no land has been allocated to these local communities, who are also arguing that the proposed 6550 hectares would not compensate for the loss of

pasture lands. Recently, the regional governor promised a larger land concession – reportedly of 10,000 hectares (GRAIN 2019). These promises remain unfulfilled, while a smaller portion of land was granted by the Gnith municipality to some villages in Ndiaël, pointing to innovative experimentation with communitarian and access-based land tenure, which shows some interesting potential.

A pervasive conflict

A symbol of the wider process of agrarian change in the delta region, the Senhuile land-grab has influenced the national debate on land reform and agro-industry development by evidencing local resistance against land allocations to foreign investors and disseminating alerts on the Sustainable and Inclusive Agribusiness Project (PDIDAS) among local residents. PDIDAS is a Senegalese programme, started in 2013, funded by the World Bank in partnership with the Global Environment Facility and aimed at building irrigation infrastructure for 10,000 hectares of land across nine municipalities of the delta, with a view to making them more attractive to agro-investors. On its website, the World Bank observed that the delta is particularly well suited for the project given the abundance of fertile land and privileged access to water, which will in turn ‘stimulate a strong demand from the private sector’ (World Bank 2013).

Interviews and the two focus groups conducted with residents in the localities targeted by PDIDAS attest to how the conflict against Senhuile had alerted local inhabitants, raising serious concerns among local farmers, who opposed a land deal which did not support peasant farming. Their concerns are also reported in the PDIDAS feasibility study conducted by the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (D’Aquino and Seck 2013, 434), which also notes the threat to the future of pastoralism in the region caused by land deals on pastoral lands, without any provision for the integration of pastoral groups in project activities. At the time of writing, the displacement of pastoralists by the project is more significant in the Thiagnaldé area, where the resistance against PDIDAS has been at its strongest. The fact that the PDIDAS project seems to target fewer pastoral lands than initially planned can reasonably be attributed to the strong resonance of the protests by pastoral groups. These protests also alerted other development agencies active in the delta. For example, a representative of the Senegal-Millennium Change Account (MCA) (Personal communication, 7 November 2014) claimed that a softer framework was necessary to regulate land deals in the delta and referred to Senhuile as a ‘bad example’ never to be reproduced in the future. The Millennium Challenge Account is a US agency, in charge of the administration of the Compact fund, a US development aid programme to Africa started in 2009 (MCA-RoS Compact 2010). The US agency was operating in the delta, training local representatives in how to handle agro-investors, experimenting with new land allocation criteria based on cadastral studies and aimed at establishing a register of land occupancy (Diouf and Elbow 2013). The MCA is also part of the land reform working group of the Presidential Investment Council – a government entity created in 2002 to provide a direct dialogue between public and private actors – and it was meant to provide technical support to both Senhuile and PDIDAS.

The experience of the MCA was pivotal in supporting the World Bank PDIDAS project initiated in 2013. Indeed, the MCA’s land regulation tools provided PDIDAS with the means to escape the impasse that had hindered it since the beginning. The PDIDAS initially

agreed on a framework for regulating the concession of land based on the transfer of lands from municipalities to the state, which in turn can grant rural municipalities an emphyteutic lease in order to allow them to sub-lease the land to investors.⁷ The proposed scheme was strongly opposed by local peasant and community-based organisations, reunited under an umbrella organisation, the *Cadre de Recherche et d'Action sur le Foncier au Sénégal*, which was created in 2013 to defend local land rights. The main issues concerned the sub-lease option, which was seen as curtailing the land control of local municipalities and communities in favour of the state and thus paving the way for further top-down land allocations. Moreover, the sub-lease can be turned into a private title after approval by the municipality and the state, thus posing the risk of definitive land alienation.

The conflict over the sub-lease was eventually resolved in 2017 when PDIDAS opted for an alternative regulation model based on a preliminary process of land titling in accordance with the MCA US agency experience, where informal land occupancy is recognised and attached to a cadastral identification number. As of December 2019, according to the World Bank implementation status and results report, 63,218 hectares have been registered (Ahouissoussi 2019). Furthermore, three framework agreements between communities, communes and investors have been signed, covering an area of 800 hectares, and primary irrigation infrastructure is almost complete and should be finalised before the end of 2020 (*Ibid.*). These new deals include the West Africa Farms (WAF) investment, led by the British group Shropshire and presented as a 'best practice' by PDIDAS. WAF settled in the delta in 2011 to farm radish and spring onion for export to the European winter markets. It was granted 200 hectares after concertation involving the rural municipality representatives and local residents owning formal and customary rights to the targeted land. They agreed to the deal in exchange for WAF's commitment to providing irrigation infrastructure on an irrigation scheme of 200 hectares, half of which had to be for the benefit of local farmers. The project was fraught by contestation from the beginning because farmers opposed the company for overstepping its concessions and failing to honour its commitments. To date, WAF has more than doubled its land area, while not building any irrigation infrastructure for local farmers, leading PDIDAS to take over this responsibility and deliver irrigation infrastructure in its place.

While the sub-lease option was rejected by local residents, the processes taking place in the delta reveal a development strategy that seems to evade any democratic scrutiny, by designating the delta as a laboratory for social transformation. As stated in the 'Support to Senegal rural land policy' report by the World Bank (Teyssier 2019), the gradual transformation of land occupation rights into real rights for the rural population (*Ibid.*, p. 13) is likely to legitimise a de facto transition away from customary tenure towards an increased commodification of land, and thus a land market (*Ibid.*, 3). The process of institutional, regulatory and social restructuring attached to this change is likely to reproduce a shift in land control in favour of the new agro-industrial actors, engendering the progressive marginalisation of local peasant farming and increasing the occurrence of land conflicts and disputes.

Development by exclusion

The advance of the corporate food regime has been pivotal for the development of neoliberal capitalism (McMichael 2012), promoting accumulation by dispossession (Harvey

2003) and dismantling national agricultures in developing countries since the 1980s. Since then, and with renewed momentum in the aftermath of the 2007/8 crisis, a new cycle of agrarian development and food regime transformation has been reloaded on a global level, and African food systems have been called to play a leading role by showing that ‘Africa can feed the world’ (Tran 2011). Under this new agro-strategy, the arrival of private investors is intended to create a competitive regime on the territories, which is assumed to spur local entrepreneurship and promote economic growth (World Bank 2007). This approach is consistent with the idea that the agro-industry system, featuring financialised commodification and corporatisation (Isakson 2014), is better equipped than peasant farmers to foster local development, secure global food supplies and mitigate climate change and environmental risks (as already underlined by De Schutter 2011).

Observed from the delta, however, this development strategy takes the form of a regime of dispossession based on the progressive exclusion of local residents, most of whom are small-scale farmers and herders. This reflects the promotion of an extractive model aligned on a logic that sees rural spaces as central resources, but not the people who inhabit them. As Saskia Sassen (2010, 25) points out, ‘the center of this logic is not the “valuing” of people as workers and consumers, but the expulsion of people and the destruction of traditional capitalisms to feed the needs of high finance and the needs for natural resources.’ Tania Li resorts to the Marxian idea of ‘surplus population’ to stress how neoliberal development implements itself through the systematic increase of socio-economic exclusion. The current land-grabbing phenomenon has been depicted as a striking example of these dynamics, according to the principle that land is needed, but labour is not (Li 2011), thus evidencing how marginality is not an accidental outcome that can be overcome with more development.

In the Senegalese context, the endorsing of this neoliberal vision of rural development led the state to support export-oriented agro-industry, facilitating a market-led transition that provides land and water access to private investors. Embedded in Senegal’s long-established food self-sufficiency narratives, these dynamics are better understood in the context of supra-regional and global development policy interventions, such as the G8’s 2012 New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, which provides the general framework for Senegal to access aid (RoS 2012c), and lists the reform of national land tenure system as a key requisite. In line with this goal, multilateral donors are also actively involved in fostering spatial reorganisation to support agro-industry, as evidenced by World Bank and MCA activities in the delta.

According to this developmental approach, the difficulties of peasant farmers who had to face state withdrawal, market liberalisation and deregulation throughout the 1980s and the 1990s are substantially reframed as a lack of skills and the capacity to expand and develop agriculture. A past developmental and political failure is in this way transposed into a private one, to be fixed by leveraging private capital, seen as a driver of development. This approach moves away from peasant farmers as actors of agrarian development and shifts towards private investors. By doing so, it does not take into consideration the many material and structural constraints within which peasant farmers operate. While small-scale Senegalese farmers and cattle-keepers fundamentally continue to experience the adverse consequences of three decades of liberalisation, privatisation and deflationary policies, large private investors benefit from tailor-made programmes, financial agreements, tax breaks and donors’ support.

This article has shown that extractive economies tend to reproduce and exacerbate pre-existing patterns of marginalisation and exclusion. The case study of the delta has proved that the marginalisation of local knowledge is a core aspect of the enclosure process, since at least colonial times. Since then, the reorganisation of the space and water resources contributed to the creation of new social relationships and hierarchies of belonging through a process of change of the landscape and the biological formation of the territory, thus creating new practices among local populations. The contemporary pursuance of this ecological and spatial reorganisation, in continuity with the past, also reveals important differences reflecting the transformation of capitalist accumulation at the global level and the mutation of the development project. Two key elements of rupture can be stressed: the saturation of the marginal areas on which Fulani pastoralism took refuge, and the tendency towards the establishment of a parallel agro-industry, poorly linked to peasant farming. However, the case of the delta also demonstrates the place of local agency in the development process, attesting to how conditions for pursuing capitalist accumulation are not given but are instead mediated by conflicts and negotiations that arise within society. Moreover, pastoral reactions to land dispossession in the delta highlight how differences in the reactions from below are not merely an issue of varying opportunities and interests. They rather reflect a specific experience of colonial and post-colonial domination, which constitutes today the subjective position from which resistance to global capitalist development is elaborated.

Within this framework, the struggle of Fulani herders reunited in the Collective for the Defence of the Ndiaël brought to the surface the historical fractures and contradictions around which capitalist expansion is organised and contested in the present. Senegal's ongoing process of land reform, particularly the Senhuile case, is of particular relevance here. While at the moment rural conflicts are quiescent, because of a temporary lapse in the presence of large investors, the decommissioning of the reserve has resulted in a long-term process of deterioration of pastoral land rights. The land-grab is an ongoing process, whose trajectory will depend on the possibility to construct and strengthen alliances among farmers' and herders' groups at local, regional and national levels to ensure recognition of pastoral land rights by including them in the new legislation. However, it is not sufficient to counter the process of erosion of pastoral land rights through sector-specific interventions. The broader context of accumulation by dispossession and exclusion requires a radical questioning of the neoliberal development project as a whole.

Notes

1. I adopt here the definition of land-grabbing given by the International Land Coalition in the Tirana Declaration (ILC 2011). Land-grabbing is defined as any land acquisition or concession that has one or more of the following features: violation of human rights; absence of free, prior and informed consent of affected people; absence of social, economic and environmental impact assessment; absence of transparent contracts or of binding commitments on the activities attached to the investment; absence of democratic planning, independent assessments and participation.
2. For further information on the *Plan Sénégal Emergent* – the 'Emerging Senegal' development model – see the Presidency of Senegal's website: <http://www.presidence.sn/en/pse>.
3. For further information on the *Plan Reva (Retours vers l'agriculture)* – see <http://anreva.org/>.
4. Réserve Spéciale de Faune de Ndiaël, Ramsar site no. 139; see <https://rsis Ramsar.org/ris/139>.

5. It should be noted that the introduction of rice was principally intended to help desalinate land and prepare it for other crops (Benegiamo and Cirillo 2015, 27).
6. See for example the Collective's urgent demand of 27 February 2014 that the Italian investor Senhuile SA withdraw from the investment: <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/4900-des-paysans-et-eleveurs-senegalais-exigent-que-la-multinationale-senhuile-sa-quitte-leurs-terres>, accessed March 3, 2019.
7. An emphyteutic lease is a type of real estate contract that allows long-term usufruct of a land asset, and is often associated with the obligation to develop the lease object. In Senegal emphyteusis was initially introduced and regulated by a French law of 25 June 1902 introduced in West Africa, which stipulated that the lease must be over 18 years up to a maximum of 99, as in Anglo-Saxon law. In 1976 the maximum duration of emphyteusis was reduced to 50 years, but the possibility of a renewal was introduced.

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