

COUNTRY BACKGROUNDER: SENEGAL

Like Mali, Senegal has incorporated food sovereignty principles into its constitution. However, as in many parts of Africa, peasant livelihoods are being threatened by corporate land grabs in the name of development and 'green' fuel production. The push for agrofuel crops—jatropha in particular—has resulted in land grabs, food shortages, high pesticide use, and the introduction of GMO or hybrid crops all of which directly impact Senegalese farmers.¹

From colonial extraction to the Green Revolution

Beginning in the mid-1800s, Senegal became one of the world's major producers of peanuts. In fact, peanut production outstripped slaves and gum to become the country's most important export in just a few short years. The expansion of peanut cultivation in Senegal was brought about by three important factors. First, European demand for fats and oils for both dietary and industrial purposes drove cultivation. Second, European investment in transport infrastructure such as the Dakar-Saint-Louis Railway and the Thies-Kayes Railway created indispensable linkages from field to market. Thirdly, the influx of slave labor primarily from present-day Mali provided the labor force necessary for labor-intensive groundnut cultivation.²

Despite outstripping slaves as a primary export from the Senegalese economy in the mid-1800s, peanut production as late as 1905 relied heavily on slave labor. French colonial population surveys indicate that the majority of slaves in Senegal in the early 1900s were of Malian origins. In more recent history, other forms of coerced labor were vital to later peanut production, particularly during the harvest season in November.

Though peanuts or groundnuts were brought to Senegal as an agro-export product after spreading from Gambia to Guinea to Sierra Leone and finally Senegal in the late 1830s, their utility as a food source did not go unnoticed. Peasants and farmers quickly found that peanuts could be grown in drier areas as a safeguard against millet harvest failure. Additionally, it was discovered that rotating millet and peanut cultivation helped to maintain soil fertility and moisture. This agroecological method is still utilized and characterizes agricultural practices in the Senegal Peanut Basin where small family farmers clear a field by burning all remaining vegetation and then employ animal-run plows to till.³

The Senegal River Valley is a fertile tract of land that has traditionally been home to innumerable African rice varieties. Irrigated rice cultivation has typically been done by families with plots of less than one acre. These small family-farms have in the past produced 70% of Senegal's rice harvest and provided livelihoods for approximately 600,000 people. However, unregulated foreign investments and the push for hybrid rice cultivation by Green Revolution

¹ "Senegal's Quest to Balance Food Security Against Biofuels." Actionaid. Available online at: http://actionaidusa.org/what/monthly_feature/senegal_quest_to_balance_food_security/

² Brooks, George E. "Peanuts and Colonialism: Consequences of the Commercialization of Peanuts in West Africa, 1830-70" *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1975), pp. 29-54

³ Moitt, Bernard. "Slavery and Emancipation in Senegal's Peanut Basin: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries". *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1989), pp. 27-50.

proponents have reduced the number of varieties of rice cultivated as well as increased rice exports dramatically.⁴

Fishers' rights and livelihoods

In addition to peanuts, fishing has traditionally been an important economic activity in Senegal. However, overfishing in recent years has devastated the industry, the livelihoods of fishermen and their families as well as formerly rich and diverse ocean habitats. Overfishing in Senegal is largely the result of government concessions to foreign fleets signed in the 1980s as well as a preferential trade agreement between the European Union and many African states that increased fish exports by guaranteeing duty-free access to the EU market. The 1994 currency devaluation further drove West African states to increase their exports in order maintain a favorable balance of payments, obtain foreign currency, and sustain profits.

Senegal's fishing sector employs over 600,000 of the country's roughly 3.5 economically active people. Fishing has overtaken peanuts as the country's primary export, bringing in about 30 percent of Senegal's export earnings. Yet it is an unsustainable industry. By the late 1990s fishing concessions to foreign fleets and increased exportation, had rendered the industry unsustainable with overfishing estimated at 30,000 tons of fish per year.

Because overfishing has so dramatically depleted the waters, peasant fishers cannot compete against the giant foreign trawlers and no longer catch larger fish like carp and hake but instead return with small fish like sardines and mackerel. Senegalese fishermen and their families have organized into a 15,000 member strong National Collective of Small-scale Fishers (CNPA). CNPA has put pressure on the government to suspend foreign concessions and prioritize the 600,000 Senegalese fishers.⁵

Conflict and militarization in the South

For the last 30 years, the Casamance region in southern Senegal has been embroiled in what is characterized as a 'low-intensity conflict'. However, Senegalese military repression and internal disputes within the armed opposition in addition to prolific landmines have killed and displaced thousands of peasant farmers and seriously threatened the region's food production. The origins of the conflict are complex and underpinned by colonial legacies of arbitrarily drawn boundaries and ethnic divides. Nevertheless, the present humanitarian crisis the conflict represents is undeniably clear – thousands of people have been killed, more displaced. Intermittent violence and landmines continue to claim more lives in this already volatile region.

Farming is the primary livelihood of people in the Casamance region. But landmines, stray bullets, and shifting conflict zones have made cashew, rice, and mango cultivation too risky for farmers. Thousands of farmers and their families have been made refugees by this protracted conflict. The Ziguinchor area alone is home to about 10,000 displaced farmers.⁶

⁴ "Saudi Investors Poised To Take Control of Rice Production in Senegal and Mali?" GRAIN. 29 November, 2010. Available online at: http://www.grain.org/articles_files/atg-28-en.pdf

⁵ Faye, Souleymane. "Senegal: Dispute Over Fishing Permits for Foreign Fleets Hots Up". AllAfrica.com. 16 April 2011. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201104180212.html>

⁶ Parayre, Christophe. "Senegal: Landmines, armed gangs spread fear in Casamance Report". Agence France-Presse. 10 December, 2009.

Minteh, Binneh S. "The Crisis in Casamance, Southern Senegal: A Constructive Conflict Resolution Approach". *Senegambia News*. 29 January, 2009.