



COLOGNE FILM FESTIVAL SHINES SPOTLIGHT ON LAND-GRABBING IN AFRICA



“How can they say the land is not ours?” asks Okello O to the camera, horrified. “Our ancestors are buried here, we were born and grew up here.” The old farmer is just one of many who were forced to leave their hometown in the Gambela region in Western Ethiopia. A Saudi-run agricultural company purchased large areas of a national park and planned to turn them into rice fields.

The fate of people like Okello O and the conflicts in the region are explored in the film “Dead Donkeys Fear No Hyena: The Green Gold”. The documentary by Swedish director Joakim Demmer was presented at the just-concluded 15th Africa Film Festival in Cologne. The festival featured 80 films from 25 African countries, including a series of documentaries and feature films on land grabbing and migration. Many filmmakers and activists are also guests.

Hunger persists despite investment

So what repercussions do African countries experience after a large amount of land is acquired by foreign companies for industrial agriculture or mining purposes? Together with Ethiopian environmental journalist Argaw Ashine, Demmer investigated the background and consequences of land-grabbing in Ethiopia. An important issue is basic food security,

says Ashine. “Millions of people need food aid every year, and the assumption was, if we have investors from agriculture in the farmland, we will get a chance to feed our own people. But it’s not true, the investors are coming to produce crops for their own people, not for us” he explains.



Demmer’s film shines a harsh spotlight not only on foreign companies, but also on the complicity of the Ethiopian government. In addition, it highlights the role of international institutions. A development program sponsored by the World Bank, for example, sought to provide access to water, food and social facilities for the rural population. However according to Demmer, in some parts of the country the project was used as a tactic to draw people away from their land. The government also pushed people out of their communities – at times with help from the military – and into new villages where they were expected to receive financial help. “It quickly turned out that there was no help available in these villages,” says Demmer, “The land that people had to leave went directly to investors.”

Eviction for South Africa’s Mpondo community?

The Mpondo people in South Africa fear they are heading towards a similar fate. The traditional inhabitants of the Amadiba eastern coastal region are trying to resist plans by an Australian company to build a titanium mine on their land. The documentary “The Shore Break”, by South African director Ryley Grunenwald delves into the ongoing struggle. “Our concern is that the mining is happening on the land which we use for livelihood, for agriculture, everything,” explains environmental activist Nonhle Mbhthuma, the main protagonist of the film. She claims that the mine project threatens not only the environment, but also the traditional way of life of the Mpondo people: “When you take the land, you also take our identity.”

The South African government argues that the mining company's project is helping kick-start the development of the region. But Mbuthuma says this is only for the short term. Instead of mining titanium, South Africa may be better off focusing on more sustainable activities such as ecotourism. "The lifespan of that mine is 22 years," she says. "After 22 years what is the next generation going to do? Nothing, the land will be destroyed completely."



No health warnings over uranium mine

The film "La colère dans le Vent" by Amina Weira explores the negative consequences of mining activities in Niger. Weira grew up in the city of Arlit, where the French company Areva has been mining uranium since 1976. "A lot of films have been shot around Arlit," the young filmmaker says. "But they describe the mining activity only from the point of view of the company's representatives."

However Weira wants to focus on the environmental and health problems in Arlit and, more importantly, give the people a voice. She spoke with former miners – including her own father – and with other residents of the city about their everyday life.

The film is critical about the lack of information available to residents about the dangers of radioactivity. "If the population knew how dangerous radioactivity was to human health, no one would be able to process and sell scrap metal from the mine," says Weira. But in Arlit, the damage has already been done and the town is contaminated. Weira hopes that her film will stop the same mistakes happening elsewhere in the future.

