
Mining in Africa

The natural and environmental resources of Africa like land, minerals, gas, oil, timber, territorial waters among others have been the object of the persistent scramble for the continent. Natural resources are often at the heart of the scramble for Africa.

Behind the political and military interventions by Coalitions of Western powers outside or under the auspices of the United Nations in countries such as Somalia, Sudan, The Democratic Republic of Congo, The Comoros, Chad, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Central African Republic, Liberia, and of late Libya and Ivory Coast is the issue of access to and redistribution of the resources of Africa.

In the full glare of international military might, the Democratic Republic of Congo signed and sealed some of the worst forms of mining contracts with transnational corporations of a number of the western countries seeking to maintain peace in that country. These contracts up-scaled the grip of transnational mining companies on the mineral resources of DRC.

The rise of foreign direct investment and by extension the rise of capitalist accumulation presupposes the subordination of local productive sectors including alienation of communities from their land. The process of accumulation squeezes value from all other sectors of the economy and the state apparatus. It also then means decreased possibilities of the African state to intervene when and where it matters most.

The extractive sector of Africa, in particular mining and petroleum has been the foremost receipt of the FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) flows to Africa and is one of the areas in which the displacement of whole communities and dispossession of millions of rural populations from access to land through the process of capitalist accumulation clearly manifest. The accompanying disorganization of their economic and social relations remains one of the persistent features of communities in mineral and petroleum extraction areas in Africa.

Resource extraction involves several stages from exploration, site preparation and development, production, processing to decommissioning. Each of the different stages require large tracks of land to facilitate the extraction and refinery of these resources.

Between 1990 and 1998, a single large-scale open mine in Tarkwa in Western Ghana displaced a total of 14 communities with a population of over 30,000. This displacement resulted in a net loss of over 7000 jobs in the area as people lost access to land and could not also be employed by the mine due to skills mismatch. Again Newmont Ahafo mine project in the north-west of Ghana displaced over 355 households in Kenyasi area alone.

Another project of Newmont in Eastern Ghana is set to displace one whole village with a population of over 300 men and women. In addition, implementation of the project would result in destruction of 1465 hectares of land and lost of 3057 farm holdings belonging to 1,208 individuals.

Further, the project would destroy 74 hectares (13%) of the Ajenua Bepo forest Reserve one of the

last vestiges of Ghana's forest reserves. Along the West Coast of Ghana, more than 72 villages are complaining of access to fishing grounds due to the intensity of offshore oil exploration and production.

The different types of capital competing for land in Africa i.e. land for local production versus land for food production and export to foreign markets; land for biofuel plantations; and land held as an asset title for financial market activity including trading and speculation further pushes farmers away from local production and undermines the potential growth and development of domestic agriculture, livelihoods and sense of communal ownership.

In Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, most people still live in rural areas, where they farm crops and livestock or derive other livelihoods from land and land-related activities. Land is thus a critical and an indispensable natural and environmental resource. Further to being a factor of production, store of value, space for shelter and recreation, and disposal of waste for animals and human beings, land is also an object that defines a constellation of social and political relations in rural communities.

Rural communities in Africa are already marginalized in terms of access to formal employment, education, health, safe water all year round, and other economic infrastructure. The basis of the popular struggles in communities affected by mining and oil extraction across the continent has been to redress the injustice of being deprived from land, the destruction of livelihoods, the disproportionate share of benefits accruing to mining companies, and general lack of developmental impact.

Clearly it is the liberalized framework that has been the benchmark for agreements that facilitate the massive transfers of land and general expropriation of Africa's natural resources. In the same but opposite measure, the still incoherent and unplanned new phase of land grab can also become a compelling argument for policy and developmental alternatives.

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