
Madagascar: Forest communities impacted by a Rio Tinto mine

Madagascar is the world's fourth largest island and is usually portrayed as being one of the poorest countries in Africa, with over three-quarters of its population mainly dependant on agriculture for their livelihoods.

The Anosy region, located in the mountains in the south east corner of Madagascar, is home to approximately half a million inhabitants. It is a wet region with varied biodiversity ranging across littoral, humid, and transition forests to marshlands and wooded bush.

Since 2005 the main city of the region, known as Fort Dauphin, has been the target of financial investment under a World Bank 'growth pole' programme which has placed mining at the core of the regional development strategy. The mine is privately owned by QIT Minerals Madagascar (QMM), a subsidiary of Rio Tinto. Over the next sixty years it will extract and export to Canada approximately 750,000 tons of ilmenite (a mineral which transforms into industrial whitener titanium dioxide).

The mine has brought dramatic changes to the lives of rural villagers who live adjacent to, and who depend upon, the local forests situated in the mine's trajectory. Approximately 6000 hectares of coastal landscape is under QMM project custody for extraction. An estimated 1097 hectares have been designated as conservation zones with restricted access.

The newly designated 'conservation zones', set up by QMM and the Forest Service, employ a system that restricts access to the forest. This means that many villagers – who previously relied on their own traditional management mechanisms – must now pay (or be fined) to enter and take products from the forest. Most are cash strapped market gardeners and fishermen earning less than a dollar per day who now find themselves excluded from this vital resource.

Some communities have already been displaced from their lands to allow for construction of a new port, quarry, roads and housing for mine workers. Others have been restricted from access to their traditional fishing sites. A cash compensation process has been applied for those affected by displacement, but there are ongoing disputes about the level of compensation delivered. Most consider it insufficient to balance the loss of access to farmlands or fishing areas that have supported their families over many generations.

The majority of local people live from the land (86%) as subsistence farmers. They designate ownership of their land by traditional means which are recognised at community level. Legal tenure is difficult and costly and of an estimated 90% of Malagasy farmers who own land, only 8% have formal land titles. Compensation processes inevitably favour those who can establish legal title.

What follows are some testimonies from local people on the impacts that have resulted from the mining project:

A 22 year old woman called Fanja, tells: "I have to collect sticks from the forest to fence the vegetable garden and stop domestic animals grazing or eating the seeds. But collecting sticks has

become a problem because the forest belongs to the foreigners (QMM). It is amazing how a forest growing in our region can become the property of foreigners. Right now, local people need authorisation to cut down trees. The worst thing is that we have to pay to get the permit... We did not have to purchase firewood [before]... Men went to collect construction wood and brought back the amount they needed to build a house. Women took advantage of free firewood and made a small business of selling it to other people... In addition, people did not buy medicines. Medicinal plants were available to us from the forest... I still rely on the forest to supply my needs, especially to collect mahampy for my occupation [weaving baskets]... In [the past], if I could not collect mahampy, I could switch to collecting firewood and make a little bit of money... Now, everything has changed. The forest is a forbidden place... If such restrictions continue we will fall into chronic hardship.”

Constand, a 31 year old man, explains how the forest became “a protected area”: “QMM came to the village... They said that they needed the forest to be protected... QMM collected signatures from each individual in the village to get approval for the transfer of forest management to them... The local community, along with the local NGO, registered their opposition to QMM’s plan to manage the forest. But this could not prevent QMM from appropriating the forest around St Luce... [They said] deforestation threatened St Luce Forest so it was time to take action... People in St Luce believed...they would still have access to the forest... So they did not oppose the plan vehemently enough.

Unfortunately, [our] hardships have been accentuated, because QMM does not allow access to the forest any more... It has taken away so many of the resources that people need to sustain their lives... Because people are poor, they need the forest... Instead of building houses of bricks, people use forest resources... Second, forested land is fertile and provides good yields of cassava, sweet potatoes and rice. Therefore many farmers clear forest in order to expand their cropland. Third, the forest provides many good things such as medicinal plants... The only thing that people are still allowed to do is collect firewood, but QMM’s forest guards must supervise anyone who wants to do that...

In the past, the local community managed the forest directly; they collected fees from tourists visiting the forest and its biodiversity. The number of tourists has increased every year, and now many foreign students come to conduct scientific research. Such visits improve people’s income.

Those benefits have [now] disappeared... Now QMM staff have tagged most of the animals living in the forest. Soon QMM will claim that all those tagged animals are theirs...

I came to the conclusion that only the government can work out a deal to claim back the local community’s rights... It is a huge challenge for people to draft a letter and send it to the respective authorities. Most of us are illiterate... The only opportunity for the people of St Luce to express their complaints is through interviews like this.”

Bruno, male, 43, remembers: “In the past, there was thick forest, but since QMM has taken over its management, it is as if the forest has diminished... This has made it difficult for us to survive, since our lives depend so directly on forest products... Our children are going to have difficulty finding construction wood and they lack money to buy it elsewhere...

Another problem is the restriction on collecting firewood, despite this being the primary means by which we cook our meals. [Now] people are obliged to go to Fort Dauphin to buy charcoal...

If I have a visitor in my house, our custom is to give them something to eat... Now I do not have a

supply of firewood, I cannot rapidly prepare a meal... I am obliged to go off to look for it... [My visitor] might leave without having eaten, which in my culture brings shame on me.”

As Zanaboatsy, male, 58, explains “[QMM] took advantage of our situation, of us being too weak to oppose them. In addition, we are mostly uneducated people; therefore we had to accept – against our will – what they [proposed].” Zanaboatsy sums up the situation by describing QMM as “the bain-tany” – literally ‘wound of the earth’, expression meaning a time of hardship and deprivation- and that he now has “no opportunity to succeed in life and provide a better future for my family.”

Extracted and adapted from: “Madagascar. Voices of Change”, Andrew Lees Trust & Panos London, 2009. The complete document is available at:<http://www.andrewleestrust.org/Reports/Voices%20of%20Change.pdf>