
Ghana: The impacts of mining

In many tropical areas mining is a major cause of deforestation and forest degradation, generating a large number of social and environmental impacts. A recent study published by Third World Network-Africa provides a detailed picture of those impacts in the Wassa West District of Ghana. What follows has been extracted from that publication.

The main minerals being mined in Ghana are gold, diamonds, bauxite and manganese, but the most dominant mineral commodity is gold. The ownership structure of the mining industry is mixed, but foreign companies control an average of about 70% shares in these mines. The dominant players are mainly junior companies from Canada, Australia and South Africa, but there are also investments from United States, United Kingdom, Norway and China. While major foreign companies own most mines, prospecting is normally undertaken by junior companies, largely local, Canadian and Australian.

In the specific case of forests, those investment have proven to be devastating. Surface mining represents a serious threat to the last vestiges of Ghana's forest resources and threatens the rich biodiversity of the country's tropical rainforest. There is a growing conflict between sustainable forest management and mining activities. The Tarkwa area --where the research was carried out-- lies in the prime timber-producing region with a good overlay of forest reserves. The area is said to contain 44% of the country's closed forest. In primary forest areas, trees reach heights of up to 45 metres, but these are at the summit of hills where mining has not yet reached. Ironically, it has the highest concentration of surface mines and exploration companies --8 of the country's 14 large-scale mines are located in the area-- some of which with licenses to operate in known forest reserves.

The removal of the forest cover is rapidly drying up rivers and streams, leading to the extinction of river hosted animal and plant species. Protected species such as the Red River hog, the roan antelope, the red Colobus monkey and the black Colobus monkeys are some of the species associated with tropical rainforest. At the community level, the threat to ecological biodiversity has economic implications: increased mining activities in the area have partly led to the reduction or extinction of certain flora and fauna species that the communities depend on. Many communities complain that snails, mushrooms, medicinal plants, etc. are no longer available in the area due partly to mining activities.

Additionally, mining has led to growing conflicts among communities displaced by mining operations, as well as to serious mining-related health and social problems (such as malaria, tuberculosis, conjunctivitis, skin diseases, prostitution, drug abuse, high cost of living, inadequate shelter, etc.) and impacts such as polluted community water sources, air and noise pollution, depletion of underground water resources, etc.

As the author of the study says, "while the policy changes introduced generous incentives to investors, the benefits of such investments to the nation are quite doubtful."

Article based on information from: Thomas M. Akabzaa, "Boom and Dislocation: The environmental

and social impacts of mining in the Wassa West District of Ghana", Accra, Third World Network-Africa, 2000