
Women, Forests and Extractive Industries: The Case of the Mikea Indigenous Women in Madagascar

Australian company Base Resources was allowed to destroy the Mikea Forest as long as it established an offset project, which, in turn, would impose far-reaching restrictions on communities to access their land and forests. This pushes women even further into dispossession and exclusion.

Madagascar is faced with unique challenges which arise from its position as a global biodiversity hotspot in a context where the extractive industries have become the main pillar of the national “development” policy. In particular, **Madagascar is one of the countries most affected by deforestation**, which is recognized as a major environmental problem with clearly gendered impacts on the population. The high priority given to the development of extractive industries at both national and international level will increase deforestation and worsen climate change. It will also exacerbate the disproportionately negative impacts on women, as evidenced in the case of the Mikea indigenous peoples of Madagascar.

Extractive industries: a major threat to forests and people

Madagascar is a so-called 'big Island' of 587 thousand km², located in the Indian Ocean at nearly 500 kilometres on the south-eastern side of the African continent. Madagascar is well known for its rich and unique biodiversity, which developed not least due to its insularity: for example, 32 species of primates, 30 species of chameleons, and 260 species of birds are found nowhere else in the world. Since the unique biodiversity of Madagascar is of global significance for the natural sciences, it has become the focus of international development assistance. (1)

In spite of its significant natural wealth, Madagascar is among the poorest countries of the world, with more than 70 per cent of the population affected by structural poverty. Over the last few years, the mining sector has become the focus of government policy efforts, with the argument that the sector has potential as the main tool for poverty reduction and development. Moreover, **transnational mining companies in search of new resources have paid increased attention to the significant mineral potential of the country, which is rich in diverse deposits and minerals, including nickel, titanium, cobalt, ilmenite, bauxite, iron, copper, coal and uranium, as well as rare earths**. Nickel-cobalt and ilmenite have attracted the majority of foreign direct investment thus far.

In particular, **the Base Toliara project, a large-scale mining project for ilmenite exploitation by Base Resources, an Australian company**, has been established in the south-western region of Madagascar. The mining project is **encroaching on the Mikea Forest**. This has attracted the attention of international conservation groups because of the forest's high biodiversity, including several rare and local endemic species of reptile, amphibian, mammal, bird, invertebrates and plants - 90 per cent of which are found nowhere else. Therefore, conserving the flora and fauna of the Mikea forest is of critical importance.

It has been argued by State actors, researchers and conservation groups alike that the main threat to

the Mikea Forest is posed by incoming farmers burning and clearing land for maize cultivation and cattle grazing. (2) However, there is little talk from those groups about the new threat posed by the Base Toliara mining project, which is **expected to clear more than 450 hectares of natural vegetation, including hundreds of baobab and tamarind trees that are endemic to the region.** On the contrary, the mining company had been given the license to destroy the Mikea Forest, provided that its promoters present a “biodiversity offsetting” strategy. This is especially important since the **biodiversity offsetting mechanism has become an integral part of the prescriptions of the international financial institutions (IFIs)** that are the main lenders of the country and the mining projects, notably the World Bank Group and the African Development Bank.

In simple terms, this means that **Base Resources will destroy a significant part of the Mikea Forest, while “protecting” another area located outside the mining perimeter (the offset)** “in partnership with local communities and environment protection agencies”, in exchange for the area that it will destroy. (3) The need for protection at the offset area is justified by the alleged threat to biodiversity caused by the forest-based livelihood activities and farming practices of indigenous and local communities. As a result, **these communities become victims of critical restrictions in access to their land, forests and resources on which they depend for their living.**

These detrimental impacts on the affected communities are already evidenced in the case of the biodiversity offset linked to the Rio Tinto QMM ilmenite mine on the south-eastern coast of Madagascar, where “the subsistence livelihoods of communities at the biodiversity offset site of Bemangidy-Ivohibe are made even more precarious by the offset project. Communities that were struggling already before are now facing an increased risk of hunger and deprivation as a direct result of a biodiversity offset benefiting one of the world’s largest mining corporations.” (4)

The gendered impacts of large-scale mining in Madagascar

Those affected by the large-scale mining operations are subjected to the restrictions on land and forest-use associated with the establishment of the mining and offset projects. Such resource use restrictions affect important subsistence and health-related activities, with critical and gendered impacts not only on livelihoods and food sovereignty, but also on customary and cultural rights.

In the south-western region, where the Base Toliara project for ilmenite exploitation is being established, **the Mikea indigenous women live almost entirely from hunting and gathering in the Mikea Forest.** For these women, the forest is “a place populated with spirits and mythical creatures which belong to Zanahary (the creator God). The forest must be used with moderation and respect for the spirits who live there.” (5)

As a result of the restrictions from the offset project, they are most likely to face a ban on a whole range of their forest-based livelihood activities, including the cutting of vegetation for charcoal production; hunting of endemic animal species for food; collecting fuel wood; collecting medicinal plants; collecting potable water; collecting materials for house construction; fishing; pasturing livestock, and collection of materials used for weaving baskets and mats.

In addition, women will lose their land and natural resources upon which they depend for their living to the mining company, in a context where they are among the poorest and vulnerable social groups. When agricultural land is no longer available, and/or soil and water sources are depleted or polluted, women's work burden is likely to increase in order to earn a decent income.

It is also important to underline that mining companies’ representatives usually enter into

negotiations only with men, excluding women from the compensation payments. Women have also little or no access to the employment or other “benefits” offered by the mining company. Thus, women become even more dependent on men, who are more likely to access and control these benefits, whereas **most of the social and environmental costs of mining are externalised on women.**

In addition to all these negative impacts, there are distinct impacts and added burdens on women. **As large-scale mining entails the replacement of subsistence economies, which have nurtured generations of communities and indigenous peoples, with the cash required to partake in the money economy, women become marginalised.** Their traditional roles as food gatherers, water providers, care-givers and nurturers are very much affected and their livelihoods that generate the cash required to partake in the money economy are destroyed by the mining.

Women, mining and climate change

The southern region of Madagascar is forecast to experience the most significant increase in temperature, coupled with successive episodes of floods and prolonged droughts. **These phenomena related to climate change will be amplified by the gendered impacts of the mining project operations in multiple ways.**

Chief among these is the **reduced water availability** for agriculture and the concerned communities, due to the significant extraction of water for mining operations along with the pollution of underground water by the mining company’s tailings. This implies that to obtain water for their households, women would have to walk a long way to find a water source that is not polluted. They will also be confronted with the potential health impacts of the water pollution combined with the high prevalence of diseases induced by climate change.

Furthermore, the clearing of 455 hectares of natural vegetation by the mining project will entail the loss of living and interconnected forests on which women critically depend for their livelihoods and income, including the loss of species sensitive to the variations in temperature and rainfall linked to climate change.

In conclusion, large-scale mining is resulting in a number of specific impacts on women who are directly affected in their daily lives by an increased burden of care work such as collecting water, feeding their families and taking care of their health. They are losing out in almost all aspects related to this extractivist activity, especially in the context of climate change. **The case of the Mikea indigenous women in the face of the Base Toliara mining project in Madagascar shows that such a large-scale mining project further pushes women into poverty, dispossession and social exclusion.**

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*** On 06 November 2019, the Council of Ministers suspended all activities related to the Base Toliara mining project. Please sign on to support communities in Madagascar standing up against the Base Toliara Mining Project and calling for its permanent suspension. [Sign the petition here.](#)**

(1) [Wright \(1997\), pg. 381.](#)

(2) Blanc-Pamard, C.(2009): The Mikea Forest Under Threat (southwest Madagascar): How public policy leads to conflicting territories. Field Actions Science Reports, Vol. 3, 2009; and Stiles (D.) 1998, *The Mikea Hunter-Gatherers of Southwest Madagascar: Ecology and Socioeconomics*. African Study Monographs 19(3):127-148 · January 1998.

(3) Coastal and Environmental Services (2013): Projet minier de Ranobe, région Sud Ouest, Madagascar. Version Préliminaire d'Etude d'Impact Environnemental et Social.

(4) WRM, Re:Common and Collectif TANY (2016): [Rio Tinto's biodiversity offset in Madagascar](#)

(5) Idem (2)