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## [Madagascar: Community of Sainte Luce says NO to destruction from mining](#)

Sainte Luce is a fishing village with a population of 2,500 located in the District of Fort Dauphin, Commune of Mahatalaky, in Southeastern Madagascar. Fishing is central to the livelihoods of families in Sainte Luce; nearby forests and wetlands additionally provide them with medicine, materials and food sovereignty. There is very limited access to public services like education and health services, and the nearest schools and health posts are some 15 kilometers away from the commune.

The village of Sainte Luce is afraid that ilmenite mining by Rio Tinto subsidiary QIT-Madagascar Minerals (QMM) will destroy their fishing grounds, lands and livelihoods. Even though no date for the mining expansion has been communicated, the community fears that such expansion may be imminent. To protect their survival as community, the village of Sainte Luce says NO to this mining project, which, if it were to proceed, would destroy the land of their ancestors.

### **“We declare our opposition to the mining project”**

In December 2023, the community of Sainte Luce delivered a letter and video testimonies to QMM and Malagasy authorities, in which they made known their opposition to the destruction of their lands and fishing grounds to mine ilmenite. This mineral is used in white paint and plastics, among other products. (1)

The community of Sainte Luce has every reason to believe the expansion of QMM's mine would spell destruction for them, based on the company's record so far.

Amidst much controversy, Anglo-Australian mining corporation Rio Tinto received a long-term mining lease from the Malagasy government in 2005. The lease handed over nearly 6,000 hectares of land to QMM – a joint venture between Rio Tinto and the Malagasy state – to mine ilmenite at three locations near the city of Fort Dauphin in southeastern Madagascar. These three locations were Mandena, Petriky, and Sainte Luce. So far, the company only has operations at one of these locations: Mandena. The ilmenite extracted by QMM is shipped to a Rio Tinto processing plant in Canada and sold as titanium oxide, which is used in white paint and plastics, among other applications. The price for one tonne of titanium oxide stood at around USD 290 in August 2024.

Mining at the 2,000-hectare lease in Mandena, just outside of Fort Dauphin, began in 2008. Shortly after QMM was granted the lease, families living near various installations related to the project were forced to give up their lands – including near the new mining port, the private conservation areas, and Mandena. Fifteen years later, there are still ongoing disputes over the compensation that QMM promised families for lost livelihoods, as families affected by the mining at Mandena claim that the compensation process left them short-changed. In May 2024, QMM agreed to re-assess the compensation payments.

Despite the massive destruction caused by the project, Rio Tinto claims that it helped protect the

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forests around the port from being destroyed, by having them declared as protected areas. In so doing, the company claims to have “offset” the destruction of the forests and biological diversity at the mining sites. (2)

In June 2023, prior to national elections that would take place later that year, Rio Tinto and the Malagasy government announced that an inter-ministerial committee was being set up to facilitate “the obtaining of different authorisations” needed to advance preparations for mining at the remaining sites, Petriky and Sainte Luce. (3)

## **Rio Tinto profits, Malagasy communities pay**

Mining multinational Rio Tinto owns 85 percent of QMM, while the government of Madagascar holds the remaining 15 percent – according to a 22 August 2023 company press release. In this press release, the company announced that the process of renegotiating the financial agreements had concluded; this renegotiation was planned for and included in the initial lease agreement. (4) In both the original and renegotiated deal, most profits go to Rio Tinto, while communities and the state of Madagascar are left with conflicts and the manifold damage left behind by the mining operations. Rio Tinto pays a mere 2.5 percent royalty on the raw extracted minerals – minerals which the company exports to its own processing factory in Canada. The renegotiated financial agreement also reduces the state’s share in QMM to 15 percent (down from 20 percent), in exchange for the cancellation of USD 77 million that the company advanced to the Government of Madagascar “to finance their funding of QMM.” Additionally, the first dividend that Rio Tinto has agreed to pay out to the government comes with conditions: the state must spend USD 12 million of it to rehabilitate 110 km of National Road 13, a main road in the region.

## **Communities face destruction and water pollution from mining in Mandena**

In Mandena, QMM’s mining over the past decade has hit three villages especially hard, and in particular the fisherfolk. Approximately 15,000 people live in the three villages bordering the mine. Many families lost their livelihoods when the QMM mining operations began to destroy the surrounding forests and fishing grounds. Families saw their fishing catch drop by nearly 50 per cent. They were forced off their lands, and many never received the promised compensation. (5)

Other major impacts of QMM’s mining include water pollution and high concentrations of lead. (6) In early 2022, residents protested that dead fish were appearing in bodies of water on the outskirts of Fort Dauphin. Shortly before the dead fish began to appear, the company had carried out “a controlled water release” to prevent (yet another) breach of the sand embankments that the company uses to keep polluted water at the mining site. This was not the first time the company had carried out an emergency release of toxic water. In 2010 and 2018, the company also spilled large amounts of polluted mining waste into bodies of water around the mine, in order to prevent the mine’s containment system from collapsing. In 2018, after the waste water was released, dead fish started appearing in the lakes. (7)

Shortly after the dead fish appeared in early 2022, the government imposed a fishing ban – which meant that fisherfolk lost their income from fishing for months. Meanwhile, QMM did what mining corporations usually do in such instances: it denied any connection between its release of the polluted water and the dead fish. (8) In a statement to the journal, *The Intercept*, the company claims that a water sample analysis it commissioned showed “no conclusive link between our mine activities and the dead fish observed by community members.” (9)

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There have been regular protests against QMM's mining operations for a multitude of reasons: there are unresolved compensation claims; lakes and lagoons have been polluted for well over a decade from the mine's wastewater system – which QMM can't be bothered to fix; communities have lost income they used to make from fishing and harvesting forest products – such as Mahampy to produce the traditional mats common in the region; communities have lost land where they grow food; the promises of employment have been unfulfilled; and communities face major health risks due to elevated uranium and lead levels around the mine. Here too, the Rio Tinto subsidiary has done what mining companies usually do in response to protests to their destructive activities: it has ignored the cause of the protest and called on state authorities to send in the police.

A report released in March 2022 by the Publish What You Pay network states that “there have been protests against QMM since the operation began in 2009. Hundreds of Malagasy people have erected barrages/road blocks and taken to the streets to strike against displacement and involuntary relocation, loss of lands and access to their local forests, destruction of sacred forest areas, inadequate compensation for lands and livelihoods, removal of ancestral tombs, and perceived inequity over QMM employment practices which have favoured workers from other countries or regions rather than training and hiring local people.” (10) Many of those protests have been met with heavy-handed police crackdowns and repression of union leaders and villagers – who are demanding that the company stop breaking the law, polluting the water, and destroying their livelihoods. (11)

Faced with police crackdowns, the incarceration of protesters, and the mining company's refusal to address their demands, residents living near QMM's Mandena mining operations initiated legal claims in the UK in April 2024. They accuse Rio Tinto of polluting the lakes they depend on for their domestic needs with levels of uranium and lead that pose a serious risk to their health. (12)

15 years of QMM mining at Mandena has resulted in destruction, pollution, conflicts, violent repression of protests, and state and QMM repression against citizens who have demanded their rights be respected. It is in this context that the community of Sainte Luce declares its opposition to QMM's proposed expansion of ilmenite mining onto their territory.

## **Sainte Luce says NO to destruction of their way of life**

Sainte Luce is the lobster capital of southern Madagascar. The fish, crabs, and especially lobster caught off the shores of Sainte Luce are sought after by restaurant chefs from as far away as Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo. Seafood fishing and the processing of forest products like amboza and mahampy – natural fibers that women use to weave mats and crafts – have sustained the community for generations.

Alarmed by the destruction and dangerous pollution caused by QMM's mine, and the drastic reduction in fish in nearby Mandena, residents of Sainte Luce have vowed to protect their ways of life and the land of their ancestors.

In March 2023, the community informed QMM and Malagasy authorities about their decision to oppose the ilmenite mine at Sainte Luce and the destruction it would bring. “We declare our opposition to the mining project” the community stated in a letter to QMM and authorities. In December 2023, community representatives delivered copies of a video from the community to Malagasy authorities and QMM. In the video, residents explain the community's decision to oppose QMM mining in their territory. They say that the community decided to prepare a video as proof that the decision was taken collectively. (13)

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“We do not want this project that will destroy our sustainable sources of income.”

## **QMM already restricts Sainte Luce community's access to their forests**

In December 2023, in between delivering the community video to Malagasy authorities and to QMM in Fort Dauphin, Sainte Luce community members had a court case to attend. At issue was the community's right to their ancestral lands – the forests that QMM calls S8, S9 and S17. QMM had these forests declared as protected areas, and claims that by doing so, it saved them from destruction. These forests are now managed by a group called FIMPIA (Fikambanana Mpiaro ny Ambatoatsinana), which is supported and financed by QMM. FIMPIA is now accusing the community of illegally entering their own ancestral lands which QMM had declared 'protected area'.

In 2009 the company released a press kit about the mine entitled 'A mine at the rescue of the unique biodiversity of the littoral zone of Fort Dauphin'. (14) The publication was part of Rio Tinto's initiative to win over – or perhaps buy off – conservationist NGOs. Some of these NGOs were initially opposed to the Rio Tinto mine because it would destroy 1,600 hectares of coastal forests. To curb this NGO opposition to its mining plans, Rio Tinto agreed to 'compensate' for the biologically diverse forests its mine was going to destroy.

But when conservationist NGOs dropped their opposition to the QMM mine, they ignored a very important question: How can one possibly offset the destruction of a unique forest – which is not only home to many rare and endemic species of plants and animals, but also home to the Sainte Luce and Mandena communities, their culture, and their ancestral connections? The alleged biodiversity offsets involve prohibiting the community from using several forests, both immediately around the mine, and in Antsotso, some 60 km north of the mining operations.

The community forest just outside Manafiafy – which is the Malagasy name for Sainte Luce – is one such location that Rio Tinto had declared as a protected area, as part of the company's "biodiversity offset" programme. QMM refers to the forest as "Zone S9, S8, S17," where "S" stands for Sainte Luce. Just like in Antsotso, the community forest outside of Manafiafy has become a biodiversity priority area for Rio Tinto. The QMM mining operation in essence involves a double land-grab: first of the mining sites, and second of the biodiversity compensation sites – in this case S9, S8, S17, and the Tsitongambarika forests at Antsotso – where community forests have been declared as protected areas at Rio Tinto's behest. (2)

“We declare our opposition to the mining project”

The community of Sainte Luce has made it clear that they will protect the lobster capital of southern Madagascar against the destruction, violence and conflict that the QMM mine would bring. They have informed the company that they put their community, livelihoods, ways of life and the home of their ancestors before the promise of short-term profit. They call on the tourism and lobster industries to support their effort to protect Sainte Luce against destructive mining, and they call on the Malagasy authorities not to sacrifice their community for quick money and personal gain. QMM has already left a trail of conflict, violence, pollution and threats to residents' health (from the elevated uranium and lead levels in Mandena and Fort Dauphin). In this David-against-Goliath struggle, we stand in solidarity with the village of Sainte Luce, whose residents have vowed to protect the land of their ancestors and the future of their community.

Association Finoana and WRM Secretariat

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- (1) Sainte Luce says NO to destruction of their forests and livelihoods for mining. [Video testimonies.](#)
  - (2) [Your Mine. 17-minute video. ReCommon.](#)
  - (3) 23 June 2023. [L'Etat entend faciliter l'extension du projet QMM à Petriky et Sainte-Luce. 2424MG.](#)
  - (4) [Rio Tinto statement on the renegotiation of financial aspects of the concession with the Malagasy government:](#)  
See (7) for how Rio Tinto uses election years to strike deals with governments.
  - (5) Villagers demand Rio Tinto compensation. Yvone Orengo. [The Ecologist. December 2022.](#)  
Orengo also notes that despite “QMM claims that they have paid out almost USD 4 million in compensation to people who were negatively impacted by the Mandena mine, by December 2009 there were reportedly 563 outstanding complaints about compensation lodged with QMM”.
  - (6) [Rural villagers living near mine in Madagascar take legal action against mining giant Rio Tinto after tests show dangerous levels of lead in their bodies, Leighday, April 2024.](#)
  - (7) Rio Tinto's Madagascar mine promised prosperity. It tainted a community. Neha Wadekar. [The Intercept. 03 April 2024.](#)
  - (8) [The section of Rio Tinto's website on its QMM operations in Madagascar.](#)
  - (9) Idem 7
  - (10) Large-scale mining's impacts: a case study of Rio Tinto /QMM mine in Madagascar. [Publish What You Pay Network. March 2022.](#)
  - (11) Collectif TANY & CRAAD-OI communiqué on 2018 protests.
  - (12) Idem 7
  - (13) Idem 1
  - (14) A mine at the rescue of the unique biodiversity of the littoral zone of Fort-Dauphin. QIT Madagascar Minerals SA Press kit. 2009.