



THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EXTRACTIVISM AND LAND RIGHTS IN AFRICA

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On September 5, 2021, special forces of the Guinea military led a coup and announced the dissolution of the constitution. This is the fourth coup in the West African region this year. Alpha Conde, the deposed leader, entered political office as a champion of democracy, promising to review mine licenses and to lay the basis for constitutional rule. The heydays of the democratisation period in 2010s was not only supposed to end military rule, corruption and maladministration, but also create enabling conditions for minerals development that is oriented to improving the quality of life, reducing inequality and eliminating poverty. In real terms, Guinea has scored poorly in the Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index, which measures social spending, progressivity of tax and labour protections, with a 2020 regional ranking of 30.¹

Prior to the coup, there were widespread protests in Guinea, not only against maladministration and corruption but also against the extreme poverty conditions which persist in spite of the mineral wealth of the country. With the world's largest reserves of bauxite, an essential raw material in aluminium production, and the single largest untapped iron reserves, the coup shook global markets². As early as April 2011, it is reported that Rio Tinto, the Anglo Australian mining giant, had engaged in corrupt dealings with the Guinean government through a personal friend of Conde, French Banker Francois de Combret³. After the revelations of the dubious transactions, Rio Tinto sold off its share of the Simandou reserves to a Chinese firm, Chinalco. Half of China's bauxite is imported from Guinea, which has offered an alternative to its dependence on Australia for imports. Russia, has also made significant investments in Guinea, with an aluminium refinery and mines.⁴

The coup leader, Mamady Doumbuya, has promised to once again review mining contracts including of those signed with Chinese firms. There are 14 public and private Chinese firms active in Guinea's bauxite sector. Since Guinea has 8.6 billion tonnes iron reserves is the last major high grade iron reserve and has been the site of intense competition to control concessions also requires mega infrastructure investments. To this end, a consortium of Singapore's Winning Shipping, Guinean mining logistics firm United Mining Supply (UMS), Chinese aluminium producer Shandong Weiqiao and Guinea's government has sought to build a deep-water port and 650 kms of railway lines. As was also the case in the financing for railway system in the colonial period in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), alongside the anticipated transport of minerals and machinery, the inclusion of other goods such as the agriculture sector reduces the overall cost of financing the transportation infrastructure project.



The extractivist nature of this project remains barefaced and intact as it does not stimulate the transformation of the Guinean and African economy more broadly. The bauxite and iron deposits of Guinea are not being utilised significantly in a regional development strategy to spur industrial development around a regional renewables sector, neither are there agro-industrial linkages that integrate smallholder producers. Infrastructure projects to prioritise and stimulate the productive capacity of the Guinean economy, let alone sub-regional and or continental development is not on the table. Neither is there significant social investment in Guinea as the Commitment to Reducing Inequality reports in 2019 ⁵ and 2020 ⁶, mentioned previously, emphasise. The Guinea case starkly exposes how the paradox of Africa's mineral wealth and extreme poverty can be explained with a political economy approach that illuminates the competing geopolitical and nationally rooted interests that preserve Extractivism.

DEFINING EXTRACTIVISM

Taking the Guinea case as a point of departure, Extractivism is more than just mining. It is a broader concept that refers to an *uneven relation* that exists between economies in the Global South and the interests and priorities of the centres of global capital. This uneven relation is facilitated by the commodification of the commons (land, natural resources, knowledge systems and culture) and the dispossession, displacement and or integration of forms and means of production and social domains that may or may not retain a degree of autonomy. The neoliberal era has intensified these patterns with renewed impulse for land and water grabs, and attempts to codify land rights and restructure property relations to facilitate capitalist investment.

Notably, China has managed to reorient itself away from a position of dependency and underdevelopment to lifting 100 million people out of poverty. It has also been able to mobilise its own resources to build an industrial base without displacing the rural economy as we see with urbanisation and decline of rural economies in the African region. Nonetheless, China is still embedded in relations of dependency on the Global North as primary markets for its goods and services. In as much as it offers a model for the Global South, it also has been turning to the African continent to address its raw material needs as the Guinea case illustrates. What needs to be on the table is how Africa, within the conditions of late capitalist crisis, can also advance its own transformation in a manner that serves priorities of addressing inequalities and environmental concerns.

I suggest that the insight that the economic dimension of Extractivism offers is to analyse the central dynamic of surplus value extraction that shapes other processes at a systemic level, and has implications for the reproduction of inequalities and the environment. These processes are facilitated through illicit and illicit financial flows, infrastructure investments that create new mechanisms for value extraction through financialization. The reproduction of inequalities is best understood through a focus on labour, and its reproduction, and environment. Usually, the latter are not factored into assessment of extractivist projects, ensuring the actual costs of these activities are externalised on the environment, host communities and public social infrastructure. To be able to better situate analysis of Extractivism, one would need to historically examine processes of economic change and how patterns of racialised and gendered forms of exploitation altered relations with the land and environment. The next section takes up an environmental historical analysis of colonialism, and in extreme cases in Southern Africa, apartheid, provides an understanding of how changing how Africans related with nature and the creation of wage labour are at the root of Extractivism.



NATURE, LAND RIGHTS AND AFRICAN PRODUCTIVE CAPACITY

Anne Philips, in *The Enigma of Colonialism*⁷, draws into focus how the colonialists in West Africa would utilise 'The conservationism' as a means to 'protect nature from people'. In effect justifying dispossession, resettlement and control of migration patterns on the basis of environmental imperialism. The connections between how Africans had to be controlled from interacting with their environment, would entail regulating production and reproduction, and thereby labour including gendered labour relations.

William Beinart⁸ takes a similar perspective when he explains how:

Colonial officers advocating regulation deemed it essential for efficient and safe natural resource exploitation and ultimately the future of agriculture whether by settlers or African peasants...Similarly, forest protection and afforestation were initially pursued largely to ensure timber extraction could be sustained...Ideas and prescriptions for environmental regulation which were applied to African areas had sometimes been forged previously in relation to settler agriculture also perceived as wasteful and inefficient (emphasis added).

In another vein, Wolpe⁹, writing in 1972 on apartheid South Africa, contends that the ultimate creation of reserves laid the basis for entrenching a system of cheap wage labour. Women played an important role in reproduction, to primarily supply the labour needs of 'white mining capital'. On the other hand, Lipton (2007: 43) points to how the reserves served the interests of plantation farmers, while mining companies shifted more to migrant labour from beyond the borders of South Africa.

As these changes were taking place from above, there were also tensions from below arising out of existing social relations of production and reproduction, and existing interactions with nature that are rooted in culture. In relation to these tensions, Beinart writing in 2000 draws in analysis drawn from Pondoland, (where in this issue we also feature an interview with Nonhle Mbuthuma¹⁰, spokesperson of the Amadiba Crisis Committee)

...a deeper concern about the threat posed to the independence of the homesteads by commoditisation through trade, by entry on unfavourable terms into the labour market and state intervention to change the patterns of land occupation. It should not be taken to suggest complete opposition to the process of absorption into the capitalist world... the people of Pondoland were by no means unresponsive to the opportunities and pressures which accompanied colonisation' (emphasis added).

Nancy Jacobs in *Environment, Power and Injustice*¹¹, draws on empirical evidence from Kuruman, a town in Northern Cape of South Africa, which had developed 'a dynamic form of economic relations of trading with mining towns but did not opt for work in the Johannesburg gold mines.' She highlights how there have been responses to environmental trauma, gendered class formation and racialised forms of economic change. Jacobs describes how:

The semi-arid thorn-veld and its river valleys constituted the immediate environment of Kuruman people, and whatever their other concerns, rain, crops, stock, access to land the costs and yields of production, and rights to produce food ranked high among their pre-occupations...Essentially... environmental injustice – structured inequalities in the ways people related to the biophysical world...





The above illustrates how the violent process of dispossession not only undermined smallholder producers and relegated Africans to cheap wage labour, but also dislocated their relations with their environment. The obstacles to the small-scale producers in agriculture and mining are centred on access to markets, finance, deposits, and mineral and land rights. But beyond these aspects, there are other structural factors that need to be considered.

This draws attention to how building productive capacity is not just a technical question. Archie Mafeje¹² writing in 2003 on sub-Saharan Africa on the agrarian question addresses how to improve productivity through appropriate land tenure systems and, what he analyses as an, African mode of social organisation with commercialisation. The latter, based on kinship, are relations of domination and not exploitation do not create an opportunity for class conflict, rupture or transformation of relations. Southern African region land and agrarian structure that is likened to Latin America, and a distinctly 'unAfrican' situation. It does leave room for negotiation, concessions and is therefore more flexible and integrates unpaid labour. But the real distinction arises in property relations since this is not being premised on exclusivity but on rights of access or usufruct. Mafeje argues further for the liberating possibilities of accumulation from below in certain socio-economic conditions. This brings into focus how the relationships with nature, labour and property relations can be conceived in different ways outside of what was established and entrenched through colonialism and apartheid.¹³

In a broader analysis of the Global South, Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros in *Reclaiming the Nation*¹⁴ explain that the dominant trajectory in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are characterised by controlled agrarian reforms (through the colonialism and land titling initiatives), uncontrolled urbanisation, stunted industrialisation and export-dependence. This results in a severe disjuncture between domestic production and consumption, as well as between economic sectors, is accompanied by extreme inequality between town and country and between domestic sub-regions.

Moyo and Yeros¹⁵ emphasise that alternative to these general trends is '*planned and articulated accumulation from below*'. Experiences of autonomous development vying for independence from the Soviet model was itself an important model of planned development. The most prominent case is China characterised by armed struggle (largely against Soviet directives), bottom-up collectivisation, balanced rural-urban development, slower-paced industrialisation, integrated agro-industrial development. Other examples include Yugoslavia (where there was an independent armed struggle and experimentation with enterprise-level self-management) and Cuba (with an independent armed struggle and collectivisation)¹⁶. Countries in Africa have their own experimentation with collectivisation, cooperatives and state-led industrialisation which are mostly associated with the immediate post-independence period.

These examples draw attention to the challenge of transforming African economies that are predominantly based on extraction of raw materials, and the disproportionate place of corporations in relation to smallholder producers, towards more diversified economies with rational links between smallholder producers and industry. The place of mining in these forms of transformations, as analysed in the case of Zimbabwe by Mberi, Mazwi and Chambati in this issue, provides a basis to consider the linkages between agriculture and mining that can be established for industrial development thereby transforming the structure of these economies. The conditions of neo-liberal reforms that came into play in the late 1980s and 1990s, have continued to have bearing on shaping the mining regime on the continent. The next section is focused on understanding how





these reforms have had an impact on mining and land rights, alongside the prevailing concern for regulation of conflict minerals and increased accountability in mining.

MINING REFORMS, CONFLICT MINERALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Neoliberal mining reforms have not created conditions ensure the building of linkages between sectors, but instead have created the conditions for deepening Extractivism. Bonnie Campbell ¹⁷highlights how the nineteenth-century formulation of mining regimes in American and British spheres guided the liberalization process of African mining regimes over the 1980s and 1990s. Underlying this were the protection of three principles. First, a right of 'free access to lands.' Second, acquisition of titles and third, a right to proceed to develop and mine the minerals discovered. Importantly, when mineral resource development is prioritised over other forms of production, it translates into displacing smallholder producers and any other assets that are not mining focused. Meanwhile, governments were expected to create conditions for low-cost production, including access to cheap wage labour on flexible terms. Introduction of contract labour has been a persistent feature of the neoliberal period.

On the other hand, on land rights, the De Soto Thesis, a prevailing view underlying land reforms presumes that communal lands are 'dead assets' which need to be converted to productive assets through titling. This is assumed to create the conditions for growth, by creating secure conditions for investments but in real terms leads to renewed land dispossession. While corporations have been able to utilise traditional authorities to facilitate access to land and natural resources, titling also facilitates their ability to enforce and secure private property rights over lands and natural resources. While it is acknowledged that customary laws are themselves exclusionary of women, emphasising the importance of women's land rights, it is still important to consider how titling opens up the threat of commodifying territories where communal rights are exercised. This positions women's land rights in a difficult terrain since titling does open up territories to the marketisation of land and natural resources,¹⁸ thus presenting a conundrum.¹⁹

Another challenging area of mining that has been the focus of policy makers in Africa with the turn to liberalisation of the mining regime is artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). A 2008 World Bank report on mine licensing advised developing countries that: "'Successful' countries have well-articulated policies and legal and institutional frameworks which support small and large-scale mining *without imposing uneconomic fiscal burdens*"²⁰ The impact of liberalisation had been to cut back on public spending that weakened the capacity of environmental regulatory authorities, research and development and extension services to support smallholder producers. There is a need for consideration for the expenditure needed to support and strengthen these public institutions and mechanisms. The capacity of the state to regulate mining had been undermined through the successive waves of mining reforms and austerity. Mining reforms were intended to draw Foreign Direct Investment but did so on terms that did not enable local economic growth and diversification, let alone centre the interests of smallholder producers.

Meanwhile, regulations were formulated across the continent in the 1980s and 1990s to formalise ASM with some countries like Ghana laying out specific laws, while others amended existing mining legislation. The outcome of these reforms has been the persistent criminalisation of artisanal mining which have also been associated with conflicts in Africa, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and more recently, the Democratic Republic of Congo. To this extent, regulating the sector





and assuring minerals extracted are not drawn from conflict situations gained a lot of attention in policy making processes.

When civil wars in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) and Liberia (1989-2003) engulfed the West African subregion, it was widely acknowledged that global trade networks of diamonds had fuelled the war. Not only did warlords profit off of the labour of artisanal miners, which included children, but also generated surplus profits for corporations such as De Beers. West Africa sub-regional initiatives sought to address this through the Kimberly Process (that included Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone). This is the global initiative was established to eliminate "conflict diamonds" by establishing a comprehensive certification system. It defines conflict diamonds as '*rough diamonds used by rebel movements or their allies to finance armed conflicts aimed at undermining legitimate governments*'. This has been criticised as being a narrow definition that does not include states and corporations as actors that can benefit from minerals in conflict situations.

An example is that of Zimbabwe in Marange where the military took over concessions by brutally displacing local communities and artisanal miners. Zimbabwe produced 12 million carats of rough diamonds valued at about US\$ 644 million in 2012. The Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) in Zimbabwe explains that exploration, mining and sorting is only done in Zimbabwe, while the cutting, polishing, jewellery, manufacturing and retailing is being done outside. Also, an auction system was introduced with mining companies preferred to sell good quality stones to international dealers, adding that the auction system favoured international dealers who had more money than local players. The outcome of this is that a greater share of value-addition happens outside of Zimbabwe, meaning not enough surplus generated is retained in the domestic economy.

CNRG emphasises the need for 'broad-based growth and development' through mineral beneficiation (value addition) and manufacturing. Additionally, CNRG recommends '*financial and technical assistance from the state*' to support local entrepreneurs 'to compete with established companies in all sectors of the economy. USAID in a review of Kimberly process in West Africa also recognises the sub-regional emphasis on the need for *financial and technical support for states* to be accrued from improved regulation from diamond mining.

THE AFRICAN MINING VISION: THE ANTIDOTE TO EXTRACTIVISM?

Accountability mechanisms that are accessible and effective to hold multinationals accountable for violations of 'mining communities' often displaced, victimised and their livelihoods, environment and health affected by mining operations. The African Mining Vision, which is discussed in in-depth articles in this issue by Yao Graham and Treasure Maphanga, outlines the African Union's broad strategy for the continent to strategically develop its minerals sector also includes a principle of Free Prior and Informed Consent. As Nonhle Mbuthuma who is interviewed in this issue asserts, the principle is to ensure communities affected by mining operations *must be consulted before exploration or any other phases in the lifecycle* of the mining project. Uneven power relations between governments and transnational mining companies, on one hand, and communities which hold diverse views and inequalities, creates a complex dynamic that continues to make ensuring consent is sought through safe, fair and equitable decision-making processes very difficult and even dangerous in practice.



Instead, what has been pervasive are voluntary mechanisms for corporations to regulate themselves at the global and regional levels. These voluntary initiatives are not even subject to a regional accountability mechanism. The African Mining Vision which is a policy framework of the African Union has been very weak in implementation. Weak political backing and engagement on the AMV and competing initiatives from the World Economic Forum has disproportionately occupied the policy making space. I argue that these voluntary mechanisms occupy a vacuum created by the weakened technical and financial support for state agencies to regulate mining. Moreover, critique of the AMV as deepening Extractivism by environmentalists in Africa such as Nimmo Bassey and WoMin Regional African Alliance draws attention to the need for a deeper assessment even if the AMV provides an alternative to corporate led initiatives, if the form still needs to be contested and further deliberated upon.

The above situation means that even though at the level of articulation and framing, the AMV offers a regional advancement in breaking from Extractivism, a policy vacuum still exists at the regional level which may also mean an opportunity to further develop on it. Thus, although the continental strategy remains side-lined, the existing frameworks still offer a baseline which can be contested and engaged as a reference point to hold states to account for weak implementation, while also advancing strategies that take on board national and local priorities to dismantle Extractivism, and with it, corporate domination.

This article has sought to contribute to elaborating on the meaning of Extractivism as centred on the extraction of surplus value and reflect on how this uneven relation can be dismantled. It has sought to outline the historical processes through which dispossession has been rationalised which was justified by environmental imperialism. Separating Africans from natural resources and dismantling their natural resource sovereignty was therefore rationalised as being environmentally sound. Examples in the Global South that have sought to transform these uneven relations were considered but the persistent challenge remains for the African continent. The manner that mining and land reforms introduced have deepened Extractivism were also outlined. The attempts to regulate conflict minerals and set up voluntary accountability mechanisms were also found to have not addressed the persistent structural transformation problem. While the AMV has offered the space to articulate, on its own terms, an alternative, it has not only had weak implementation but also experienced criticism by some environmentalists on the continent, bringing into focus the need for an intervention that attempts to build bridges and explicitly grapples with the contradictions of development under capitalism which mining as a sector amplifies. By its very nature, asserting African Resource Sovereignty is anti-imperialist, and thereby risky, contradictory and controversial. If we are to break from our location in the periphery of an uneven global system that depends on our resources to maintain these relations, it cannot be avoided. If we are to liberate ourselves from extreme poverty, inequality and underdevelopment, we must define and assert African Resource Sovereignty.





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