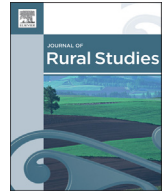




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# Gold mining, indigenous land claims and conflict in Guyana's hinterland

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, Guyana's gold-rich interior has been the location of numerous, mostly low-latent, conflicts. In each case, groups of Afro and Indo-Guyanese originating from the country's coastal cities and towns – popularly referred to as 'Coast Landers' – have clashed with indigenous Amerindians over control of remote parcels of land containing gold deposits. Each appears to have a valid argument in support of its position: the former contend that they are legally entitled to work these lands, having obtained the requisite permits from the central government to mine for gold, whilst the latter maintain that such decisions constitute a breach of their human rights, and draw attention to key legislation in support of their case. This article broadens understanding of the dynamics of these conflicts by reflecting more critically on the arguments presented by both parties. Drawing heavily on research conducted in Mahdia-Campbelltown, one location where frictions between Coast Lander mining groups and Amerindians are particularly serious, it is argued that these disputes are not about control of gold riches as is popularly believed but rather a product of deeply-rooted ethnic tensions between these parties.

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## 1. Introduction

On 25 January 2013, residents of the village of Isseneru, a remote indigenous Akawaio Amerindian settlement of 260 people in Region Seven (Cuyuni/Mazaruni) of Guyana, took to the streets of Georgetown, the country's capital.<sup>1</sup> The 80 protesters scattered along Vlissengen Road outside of the Office of the President were voicing disapproval over a court decision made by Judge Diana Insanally to allow Joan Chang, a mine concession holder, to extract gold on lands within Isseneru. In the eyes of the Akawaio and their supporters, the ruling was unjust because according to Guyana's *Amerindian Act 2006*, any miner who wishes to enter and operate on Amerindian lands must first obtain the 'permission' of the

relevant Village Council,<sup>2</sup> comply with all legislation, and provide compensation to locals (Canterbury, 2014). But Judge Insanally decided that this *only* applies to individuals in possession of mine permits obtained *after* implementation of the act. Ms Chang, therefore, was deemed exemptible because she had secured her claim in 1992.

The Isseneru dispute is one of several high-profile conflicts that have surfaced in gold-rich sections of Guyana's hinterland in recent years (Bulkan, 2014). In each case, groups of Afro and Indo-Guyanese originating from the country's coastal cities and towns – hereafter referred to as 'Coast Landers' – have clashed with Amerindians over land. With the state being the ultimate holder of sub-surface rights,<sup>3</sup> court battles over remote, largely-unmonitored, sections of Guyana's interior where settlements such as Isseneru are found, areas which Coast Landers are interested in mining but from their distant Georgetown bases and where indigenous titling histories are not particularly well-documented, are bound to continue surfacing. Both parties appear to have valid arguments: Coast Landers contend that they are legally entitled to work these lands, having obtained the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Isseneru villagers picket OP over court ruling', [www.stabroeknews.com/2013/news/stories/01/26/isseneru-villagers-picket-op-over-court-ruling/](http://www.stabroeknews.com/2013/news/stories/01/26/isseneru-villagers-picket-op-over-court-ruling/) (Accessed 4 November 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The *Amerindian Act 2006* establishes that a Village Council be installed to administer Amerindian villages, comprising a *Toshao* (chief) and councillors. The Council is tasked with, *inter alia*, representing the Village, providing advice and strategic direction to the Village, and managing and regulating the use and occupation of Village lands.

<sup>3</sup> As stated in Section 6 of the *Mining Act 1989*.

requisite permits from the government to mine for gold, whilst Amerindians maintain that such decisions constitute a breach of their human rights, and draw attention to sections of the *Amerindian Act 2006* and complementary legislation in support of their case.<sup>4</sup> Further analysis of both positions, however, reveals that these disputes are far more complex than they first appear.

The purpose of this article is to refocus the debate on conflict in Guyana's gold-rich hinterland by reflecting more critically on the arguments presented by both Coast Landers and Amerindians. Dialogue on the subject has taken an intriguing turn of late in response to the growing influence of the latter in policymaking. It is no secret that, since the colonial period, Guyana's Amerindians have struggled mightily to have their voices heard in national development debates. But the recently-implemented *Amerindian Act 2006* has provided a platform – however fragile it may seem – for Amerindian groups to influence decisions which may affect the development of the country's resource-rich interior. Their increased visibility in national-level negotiations has been evident in the discussions that have emerged over access to, and development and deforestation of, the hinterland since implementation of the country's Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS)<sup>5</sup> in 2009. With a major emphasis of UN REDD+ programming<sup>6</sup> being the welfare of indigenous, forest-dependent peoples, Amerindians now have, for perhaps the first time, a fairly visible 'space' in which to engage in national-level and international dialogue, the most recent wave of debates dominated by their strained relationships with Coast Lander groups involved in gold mining, currently Guyana's most important industry. As the discussion that follows clarifies, however, these rifts are not over access to gold *per se*, as is widely believed. Rather, and as will be explained, similar to conflicts which have surfaced in other resource-rich developing countries (Solono, 2016; Conde, 2017), the disputes that have intensified in many gold-rich sections of Guyana's interior in recent years are the product of deep ethnic divisions, specifically a Coast Lander-Amerindian divide that has shaped the development of the country for decades.

The paper begins with a brief review of the literature on conflict and ethnicity in resource-rich developing countries, analysis which helps to 'situate' the case study of Guyana examined here. Section 3 focuses on the Guyana case, tracing the origins of the innumerable disputes which today plague the country's gold-mineralized terrain. Section 4 presents a case study of Mahdia-Campbelltown, twin townships where tensions between Amerindians and Coast Lander mining groups have escalated over the past decade, to illustrate more clearly the dynamics of these conflicts. Concluding remarks are then provided.

## 2. Understanding the ethnic dimension of conflict in resource-rich developing countries

Today, many resource-rich developing countries have become 'hot spots' of civil violence. The major shortcoming with some of

the more popular analysis which attempts to explain why, however, is its lack of nuance: there is often the presumption, or at times, outright declaration, that the *presence* of natural resources is responsible for such conflict. Significant criticism (e.g. Nathan, 2005; Bensted, 2011; Cuvelier et al., 2014) has been directed at the work of Paul Collier in particular (e.g. Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Collier et al., 2009) over his reductionist approach to analyzing what is clearly a very complex issue. It has become almost routine to highlight the limitations of Collier's work but given how influential it has become, the criticisms and cautions seem justified.

Collier's 'greed versus grievance' typology appeals to donors because of its accessibility and simplicity. But as Bensted (2011) explains, the conclusions reached by Collier, who he himself concedes has deliberately omitted criteria that are difficult to measure, such as opportunities for corruption, the influence of leaders over rebelling factions and suppliers of arms, are based on narrowly-defined quantitative indicators. Whilst perhaps intended as a basic starting point for analysis of natural resource-based conflict, Collier's work seems to have had the opposite effect: providing inspiration to a host of scholars who have proceeded to assemble equally-ambiguous datasets and models (Welsch, 2008; Fjelde and De Soysa, 2009; Bennour, 2009; Torvik, 2009; Bjorvatn and Farzanegan, 2015), and to overzealous donors keen on 'doing something' to mitigate violence and as a result, publishing ungrounded critiques (UN-HABITAT, 2012; Barma et al., 2012). The problem with this body of analysis is, as indicated, that it misleadingly implies that it is the natural resources themselves – specifically, the view that various groups believe they can gain access to them – that is triggering civil violence in developing countries. Proponents of this position, imply Lujala et al. (2005), have inadvertently truncated the traditional 'three-factor model of rebellion' inspired by Gurr (1970) of *motivation* (or *frustration*), *opportunity* and *identity*, to mostly *opportunity*, in many cases cavalierly concluding that it 'provides considerably more explanatory power than grievance' (p. 540).

Whilst an abundance of natural resources undoubtedly influences all three of these factors, arguing that a desire to accumulate wealth for personal gain is chiefly responsible for inciting civil violence in developing countries runs the risk of side-lining what may be 'legitimate grievances that many people have felt due to social injustices, corruption and other concerns, during different time periods' (Bensted, 2011, p. 89). Believing that conflicts in resource-rich settings are owed to belligerents' greed and/or broader macro-level elements, explain Cuvelier et al. (2014), 'tends to yield rather unsophisticated analyses, which downplay the importance of various complex political and social processes at the grassroots level'. The authors draw on opinions shared by Winslow and Woost (2004) for emphasis:

Culture, ideology and power struggles disappear to be replaced by simple financial feasibility. Rebel leaders are reduced to a perverse form of that old staple of neoclassical economics, the rationally calculating generic man who, given enough funding and the right advertising, can manipulate almost anyone to follow any cause. [p. 16]

Several scholars have sought to build on the simplistic greed versus grievance typology, producing work which has yielded a more dynamic critique. A detailed survey of this literature is beyond the scope of the present paper but several different lines of analysis have emerged that have contributed to the nuance of the current debate on natural resource wealth and conflict in developing countries. Various issues explored include the value of particular commodities, their accessibility and a host country's

<sup>4</sup> In addition, many Amerindian leaders have argued that the *Amerindian Act 2006* is inconsistent with international commitments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

<sup>5</sup> The LCDS is built on a vision of developing a low-carbon development path for Guyana, financed in part by a Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) agreement with Norway. It outlines key strategic areas for development of the country, including two that affect Amerindian communities.

<sup>6</sup> Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) is a United Nations-led initiative which attempts to create financial value for the carbon contained in forests. REDD+ seeks to go beyond deforestation and degradation. See 'UN-REDD Programme', [www.un-redd.org/aboutredd](http://www.un-redd.org/aboutredd) (Accessed 13 December 2015).

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