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Nickel mining in northern New Caledonia - a path to sustainable development?

Matthias Kowasch



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**Author:** Matthias Kowasch, University of Graz (Austria), matthias.kowasch@uni-graz.at

**Address:**

University of Graz  
Department of Geography and Regional Science  
Heinrichstr. 36  
8010 Graz  
Austria

**Abstract**

Mining is associated with unsustainable development pathways and frequently, local communities are affected by environmental degradation and social upheavals. In many developing countries, its macroeconomic effects are negative and promote conflict. At the same time, the resource sector is an engine of economic growth.

The Koniambo nickel project in the French overseas territory of New Caledonia is unusual compared to other large-scale projects worldwide. Kanak independence aspirations resulted in the Koniambo project, as an 'instrument' for their economic and political emancipation from France.

The mining operator KNS, a joint venture of the local, Kanak dominated SMSP and the Swiss group Glencore, is taking measures to reduce environmental impacts, privileging local employment and supporting ethical business practices. I examine the success of KNS operations through its sustainable development report and based on several years of fieldwork in and around the site. I discover a mixed picture. Alternative economic practices of benefit to the Kanak population are less than successful, and social disparities within indigenous communities are widening. Customary land is being commodified and developed, driven by neoliberal goals. Like other large-scale mining companies in New Caledonia, KNS profits from tax exemptions. To contribute to a true sustainable development with less 'green-washing', Koniambo needs to provide solidarity-based criteria for subcontracting, and pay appropriate taxes to the New Caledonian administration. The political authorities need to establish a wealth fund for future generations and should initiate economic diversification before dividends from the nickel sector fill its coffers.

**Key words:** *Nickel mining, New Caledonia, sustainable development, indigenous people, economic emancipation, imperial lifestyles*

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