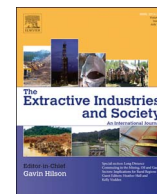




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Explaining fragmented and fluid mobilization in gold mining concessions in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Sara Geenen^{a,*}, Judith Verweijen^b^a Institute of Development Policy and Management, University of Antwerp, Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), Belgium^b University of Ghent, Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of industrial mining in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has sparked social mobilization in gold mining concessions, most of which are important sites for artisanal mining. Congruent with observations on the nature of social movements in Africa, such mobilization is hyper-fragmented and fluid. We ascribe this high degree of fluidity and fragmentation both to factors internal to the social mobilization effort, including limited organizational potential and the heterogeneity of attitudes and discourses, and the political and socio-economic context, characterized by intense conflicts, patronage-based politics, poverty and repression. Additionally, we identify certain company practices as undermining the sustainability and coherence of social mobilization, in particular: the co-optation of intermediaries and protestors, acquiescence in practices of favoritism, fostering a repressive climate, and token commitment to community participation. We conclude that to understand social mobilization in mining concessions, it is important to study the interplay between political (re) actions ‘from above’ and ‘from below’, and to recognize the diversity of these (re)actions, which are located on a wide spectrum between resistance and repression on the one hand, and collaboration and co-optation on the other.

1. Introduction

In the wake of the peace accord that formally ended the Second Congo War (1998–2003), transnational mining companies have (re) started industrial exploration and production in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite ongoing volatility. This intensifying corporate interest (especially in gold) heralds a new chapter in the Congo’s long and intricate history of mining, marked by episodes of industrialization and de-industrialization, nationalization and privatization, militarized mining and artisanal frontier mining (Bryceson and Geenen, 2016). One of the defining features of the most recent episode of nascent industrialization is tension between artisanal miners and transnational companies as well as between companies and communities more generally. This article provides insight into such tensions through the lens of social mobilization *around* (and not necessarily *against*) industrial mining.

In line with observations on the nature of social mobilization in Africa (de Waal and Ibreck, 2013; Larmer, 2010), we observe that mobilization around industrial mining in the Congo is both very fluid – rapidly intensifying and waning over time – and extremely fragmented–having limited coordination, while the involved groups pursue

different goals and adopt diverse strategies and discourses. We ascribe this fragmentation and fluidity to both factors internal to the mobilization effort, including pronounced divisions and limited organizational capacity, and to contextual factors, in particular the salience of patronage-based politics, conflicts, repression and poverty. Additionally, we focus on the role of mining companies, highlighting the following practices: co-opting local elites and protestors, acquiescence in favoritism by local elites, fostering a climate of repression and a more rhetoric than real commitment to community participation. We contend that these actions and reactions ‘from above’ often remain under-analyzed in scholarship on social mobilization around extractivist projects, which tends to focus on ‘political reactions from below’ (Borras and Franco, 2013). However, to understand how mobilization unfolds, it is needed to adopt an interactionist approach, which looks at the interplay between political actions and reactions both ‘from below’ and ‘from above’, and which situates these on a broad continuum between resistance/repression and collaboration/co-optation.

Our argument draws on empirical material from two gold mining concessions in the eastern Congo operated by Banro Corporation, a Canada-based transnational company. Since the dynamics of mobilization in these concessions display important similarities, we have

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Sara.geenen@uantwerpen.be (S. Geenen).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2017.07.006>Received 17 January 2017; Received in revised form 21 July 2017; Accepted 23 July 2017
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generalized the findings emerging from the research conducted at each site, rather than treating them as comparative case studies. Data were obtained through extensive fieldwork conducted periodically by the authors between 2008 and 2016, during which interviews were held with artisanal miners, farmers, local authorities, security services, civil society organizations and mostly Congolese company staff. Field data were complemented by and triangulated with a wide range of documents including letters, petitions, company communications, and news articles from Congolese and international media.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we draw on relevant literature on social mobilization, specifically in relation to large-scale mining, to identify the debates to which this article aims to contribute. Section 3 analyzes social mobilization in Banro's concessions, focusing on its fluidity and fragmentation. In Section 4, we provide explanations for the observed nature of mobilization, exploring factors which are both internal and external to the mobilization effort. Section 5 then discusses the influence of company practices, which paves the way for a concluding section on the importance of integrating political actions 'from above' into the analysis of social mobilization around industrial mining.

2. Social mobilization and large-scale mining

Social protest against large-scale mining is increasingly analyzed through the theoretical lens of 'social mobilization'. Bebbington et al. (2008: 2890) understand such mobilization primarily in terms of the defense of the material and immaterial aspects of livelihood, positing that it aims "to protect assets by challenging the structures, discourses and institutions that drive and permit exploitation and dispossession". Building on this work, a growing body of literature analyzes how social mobilization against large-scale mining is framed, expressed and organized, and the conditions that shape it (e.g. Kirsch, 2014; Samorna, 2013; Urkidi, 2010).

Reacting against the tendency to romanticize 'resistance', or conceptualize it in a monolithic manner, the recent literature on social mobilization against extractivist projects emphasizes the need to study the entire spectrum of "political reactions 'from below'" (Borras and Franco, 2013; Hall et al., 2015). This implies looking not only at different types of protest, but also at forms of acquiescence and mobilization around participation in decision-making and the distribution of socio-economic benefits. Attention to diversity also entails exploring social divisions and conflicts, and how these are transformed or created by different attitudes, interests and alliances in relation to the extractivist project (Bebbington et al., 2008; Conde and Kallis, 2012; Haalboom, 2012).

The call for recognizing divisions and diversity chimes with recent literature on social movements in Africa, which emphasizes their limited coherence and pronounced pluriformity, including in terms of worldviews and mobilizing discourses. For Larmer (2010: 252), this diversity indicates how these movements reflect "the contradictions and hierarchies of the society in which they operate", including those shaped by "inequalities of resources, influence and education and differences of class, gender and ethnicity, amongst others". Similarly emphasizing divisions and inequalities, de Waal and Ibreck (2013: 309) highlight how these features, in combination with the salience of informal and personalized politics, render social movements susceptible to co-optation and transformation into "alternative patronage systems". The resulting fragmentation undermines these movements' sustainability, giving them an episodic character. According to Bebbington et al. (2008), who analyze mobilization around extractivist projects in other contexts in the Global South, the susceptibility to co-optation and acquiescence is also shaped by economic and political opportunity structures, in particular the positioning of the extractivist project within the local economy and the degrees of repression encountered.

The political and socio-economic conditions in which protest emerges influence the possibilities for the mobilization of financial,

human, organizational, and informational resources (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, 2001). From the perspective of resource mobilization theory as first formulated by McCarthy and Zald (1977), sustained social mobilization requires organizational structures capable of harnessing financial and human resources. It is therefore facilitated by pre-existing forms of organization. For social movement theorists highlighting political opportunity structures (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007), the ability to organize and attract resources is also influenced by the relative strength of a movement's domestic and international allies, and the nature of the political order in which it is situated, including its openness to new political actors and the level of repression (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007).

With regard to extractivist projects, counter-mobilization is not only shaped by a country's authorities, but also by company reactions. However, the role of the company is not always systematically explored, as much work focuses on mobilization 'from below'. Nevertheless, a growing body of literature studies the strategies and tactics that corporations employ to pre-empt or quell resistance, including divide and rule initiatives like co-optation and astroturfing, public relations efforts, lobby campaigns, and direct and indirect forms of repression and intimidation (e.g. Dunlap, 2017; Kraemer et al., 2013; Lasslett, 2014). A part of this literature explores how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs are harnessed within efforts to avoid or diffuse contestation (Bebbington et al., 2008; Rajak, 2011), including by enlisting local elites as "first line of corporate defense" (: 143).

The focus on CSR and counter-mobilization reflects growing analytical attention to how corporate policies shape company-community relations, and the ways in which these policies are implemented and experienced (Haalboom, 2012; Kirsch, 2014; Welker, 2014). This literature foregrounds company representatives' agency when implementing corporate policies, and how these representatives interpret company guidelines according to their own vision. Therefore, it is important to study company practices *as actually enacted* and not as merely contained in formal policies. These practices include acquiescence and inaction, for not acting is also a choice. In this contribution, we intend to account for these nuances, focusing on company representatives' actions and inactions, rather than on 'company strategies'. The reasons for this are also methodological: since few of the observed corporate practices could be traced back to formal policies, and because the company staff contacted articulated different visions (cf. Welker, 2014), it was difficult to unambiguously identify 'company strategies' unless a clear and consistent pattern of practices could be detected.

3. Social mobilization in Banro's concessions

Canada-listed Banro was one of the first corporations to launch activities in the eastern Congo after the area formally passed from rebel to central government control in 2003. After exploration activities had started around 2004–2005 in Namoya (Maniema province) and Twangiza (South Kivu province), a census of artisanal miners working and of households (of mostly farmers and to a lesser extent miners) living within the core mining perimeter was carried out in 2008 (see Table 1). A couple of years later these miners and farmers and their families were forcefully displaced. In each concession, a Community Forum negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which were signed in 2010 (Twangiza) and 2014 (Namoya), respectively. Twangiza Mining (Banro operates through subsidiaries in each concession) went into commercial production in September 2012, with Namoya Mining following suit in January 2016.

Throughout the different stages of the mining project, from exploration to development to production, Banro's presence has generated various cycles of social mobilization. As further explained below, these have been characterized by fluidity, being episodic rather than consistent, and fragmentation, with ill-coordinated and disparate groups formulating different and changing claims, expressed in different discourses. One of these groups is local authorities, which differ per

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