World Development Vol. 56, pp. 62–76, 2014

0305-750X/$ - see front matter
www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.10.024

# Aid with Blinkers: Environmental Governance of Uranium Mining in Niger

RASMUS KLØCKER LARSEN
*Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Sweden*

and

CHRISTIANE ALZOUMA MAMOSSO *
*Directrice du Bureau d'Etude, Niamey, Niger*

**Summary.** — The role of development cooperation in fostering improved environmental governance of extractive industries in African countries exposed to the expanding global uranium frontier remains ambiguous. With primary data, this paper demonstrates how foreign aid to Niger has ignored grievances on grave environmental impacts and rampant institutional failures while a crisis discourse on desertification and food insecurity diverts attention from geopolitical interests in mineral wealth. We argue that aid delivery remains insufficient to address structural deficiencies cemented by decades of investment-friendly 'politics of mining' and conclude that domestic reforms must be backed by stronger transnational accountability mechanisms to overcome corporate impunity.


*Key words* — Niger, Africa, aid, development, environment, extractive industries

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Surging demands for energy are fueling the expansion of the geographies of exploitation of uranium ore. Playing into the growing international scramble for land and its mineral resources 'extraction frontiers' (Conde & Kallis, 2012) are pushed into resource rich but often politically and institutionally marginalized environs that struggle to govern the industries. In many ways, the human rights issues spurred by the extractive industries epitomize the dilemmas provoked by the contemporary neoliberal privileging of transnational corporations, enjoying the benefits of globalization without seeing corresponding regulatory instruments (e.g. Joseph, 1999). A body of research has documented the social and environmental impacts of mining-led development ventures and the legitimate grievances of communities. This is true for the extractive industries in general (e.g. Bleischwitz, Dittrich, & Pierdicca, 2012; Campbell, 2012; Hilson, 2012a; Hilson & Ackah-Baidoo, 2011; Hilson & Yakovleva, 2007; Smith, Shepherd, & Dorward, 2012) and for uranium mining in particular (Conde and Kallis, 2012; Keenan, 2008).

In this paper, we inquire into the capacity of existing governance regimes to address such grievances and provide remedies for plaintiffs and, specifically, the efficacy of international support through development cooperation in improving the access to environmental justice. In so doing, we contribute to a branch of research into the development challenges of extractive industries concerned with how policy, businesses, and development practice can foster the structural institutional relations that condition more desirable outcomes (e.g. Campbell, 2012; Pegg, 2006; Spiegel, 2012). This also serves to help fill a void. As argued by Campbell (2010), the role that international organizations play in conditioning the structural relations of power has so far largely been overlooked—perhaps partly because of the congruence between the worldviews of these institutions and the rationalities of existing mining regimes, which they in many cases have been instrumental in fostering. Moreover, previous analyses have generally focused on the role of International Finance Institutions (IFIs) (e.g. Hatcher, 2012) and only to a lesser extent the bilateral or multilateral aid flows through national or regional institutions, such as individual OECD member states or the European Union.

Studies of extractive industries and the operation of multinational corporations in developing countries have often-times been framed in relation to the hypothesis of a 'resource curse', i.e. that there is more motivation to suppress democratic institutions when quick monetary gains can be made on centralized resource exploitation through extractive industries. Efforts to identify statistical correlations between mineral wealth and the democratic quality of governmental institutions have provided inconclusive results (Brunnschweiler & Bulte, 2008). This should not be surprising, since governance comprises of complex social contingencies. In this paper, we build partly on the assumption of Dam and Scholtens (2012) that what is at stake is a "curse of poor institutional quality". However,

* The research presented in this paper grew out of the Research and Communication Program (ReCom) on international development cooperation funded by the Danish International Development Cooperation Agency (Danida) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) (see Ravnborg *et al.*, 2013). Helle Munk Ravnborg, Senior Researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), acted as project leader, helped frame the Terms of Reference for the study and provided valuable feedback for the analysis of the evidence. Writing of this paper was made possible through funding from the Swedish Research Council Formas. We also acknowledge the excellent comments received from three anonymous reviewers of the journal. Finally, we extend a warm *merci infiniment* to the many people in Niamey, who showed trust in our work and shared their insights to this study. Final revision accepted: October 19, 2013.

concurring with Keenan (2008), we acknowledge the 'overdetermined' character of uranium mining and its institutional arrangements, that is, with multiple and nonlinear causal relations between conditioning factors and varied local responses. Hence, we do not aim to derive supposedly replicable design principles transferable between country contexts. Acknowledging the deep contextuality of all mining ventures and local struggles, we seek qualitative insights to be learned from concrete experiences and how international institutional support plays into the complex domestic and local realities shaped by the global uranium rush.

For the analysis, we mobilize evidence from the uranium mining industry in Niger, a country that has received sparingly little coverage in the development studies literature on mining. We therefore devote some space to provide a rich picture of the environmental governance of the Nigerien uranium industry, representing one of the only scholarly accounts presently available. In a wider sense, the paper also aims to help counter the 'global imperception' of the role of African countries and Africans in the international uranium industry. As argued by Hecht (2009), uranium mines have, in the friction between transnational politics and post-colonial power relations, remained techno-political margins. In our inquiry, we draw on relevant bodies of theory concerned with the construction of development paradigms (e.g. Verhoeven, 2011), uranium mining and extractive industries (e.g. Conde & Kallis, 2012) and environmental governance in the West-African Sahel (Nielsen & Vigh, 2012).

Below, we first position the study in context of past research on extractive industries and development cooperation and then outline the methodology and sources of evidence. In the data and analysis section, we introduce Niger's development challenges and the legacy and structure of its uranium mining industry. We then present and organize the evidence in a narrative storyline emerging from our synthesis of interviews and secondary data. First, we outline the regulatory regime and institutional structures put in place to curb undesirable environmental impacts. Second, we critique the performance of this regime through the insights of key actors mandated to enforce regulations or affected by alleged noncompliance. This demonstrates that the mining corporations operate in the face of extensive grievances and complaints from civil society organizations representing local populations concerning pollution, land appropriation, and human health impacts. Third, we contrast the emerging picture of rampant institutional and human resource capacity gaps with the de facto delivery of development cooperation, revealing considerable 'blind spots' in strategic priorities, aid flows, and programmatic design.

On this basis, in the discussion section, we argue that current delivery of development cooperation remains largely insufficient to address the deeper structural deficiencies cemented by decades of investment-friendly politics of mining. We suggest that crisis discourses on desertification and food insecurity may serve as instruments to divert attention from geopolitical interests in the country's mineral wealth. Thus, bilateral and regional (European) development cooperation appears to struggle with the many of same internal contradictions as has previously been shown for the multilateral institutions such as the World Bank. We pose the question if development cooperation, subject to donor countries' vested interests, is up for the job to empower local and domestic actors committed to revise investment policies and reform deep rooted informal cultures in government institutions penetrated by corporate power. Finally, we argue that dilemmas of corporate impunity may only be addressed with the backing of enforcement mechanisms for so-called extra-territorial obligations of home states to exert jurisdiction over companies domiciled within their territory.

## 2. BACKGROUND

When encountering the damages and risks posed by the mining industry, local communities, and national civil society groups may foster varied forms of resistance to protect their locales and secure perceived legitimate entitlements. At times, social resistance movements are able, through combinations of local, national, and transnational mobilization, to penetrate neoliberal regimes and their hegemonies and insert subaltern worldviews to partly counter dispossession and participate in a co-production of outcomes (e.g. Bebbington, Bebbington, Bury, Lingan, & Muños, 2008). Nonetheless, extending the research on environmental social movements Conde and Kallis (2012) has demonstrated the considerable limits imposed by social and political marginalization on local resistance against the impacts of the global uranium industry and its commodity chains. In Niger, the more organized mode of contestation, expressed by Tuareg rebellions, over local impacts and fairer allocations of uranium mining revenue is overlaid and blurred by the securitization of the region shaped by the presence of French military advisors and the continued questioning of the legitimacy of the nation state and its borders (Keenan, 2008).

In other mining ventures smallholder farmers and other rural groups may opportunistically shift livelihood options and engage in small-scale artisanal mining. However, the technical organization needed to extract uranium ore and handle the radioactive risks dictates a centralized mode of production largely rid of openings for the smallholder livelihood scrambles seen in, for instance, gold and coltan mining (e.g. Hilson & Yakovleva, 2007; Bryceson and Jønsson, 2010; Spiegel, 2012). Local communities may, in general, benefit only via direct inclusion in the formal labor force, engagement in associated business activity (e.g. in the mining towns) or via compensations paid to the localities either directly or via tax-revenue. Arguably, this very structured interface between locale and industry has implication for analysis as it shapes local outcomes, the possibilities for rights holders to assert claims, and the options for authorities to intervene. Attention to small-scale mining and informal community based development initiatives is less potent compared to the capacity of governing institutions to mediate between industry and locality.

To be sure, the basic premise of community struggle for environmental justice in the face of encroaching mining ventures is that of a highly unlevel playing field. The regulatory and institutional realities of African mining remains heavily influenced by the policy reforms of 1980s and 1990s, which aimed to provide the conditions to attract foreign high risk capital within a neoliberal paradigm in which the public regulatory framework was relegated to ensure the stabilizing conditions for investors. Many of these liberalization reforms were driven through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Bourgouin, 2011). Preferential treatment was established for mining corporations under the doctrine of 'free mining' to secure tenure rights for mining companies (Campbell, 2010). Otto (1997) identified more than 90 countries worldwide revising their mining legislation only during 1985–95 with an eye to attracting investors with draw cards such as secure land tenure, profitability, and policy stability. In practice, this has allowed the easy entry into lands where minerals are in public ownership, relegating the voice