Mineral Policies for the Sahel that are Good for the Environment and Good for People

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A. Touré (WARO)

The resumption of mining activities in most of the countries of the Sahel over the last decade prompted the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to carry out a study that shows the harmful effect of mineral extraction on what is already a fragile environment. Reconciling mineral exploitation with preserving the environment and the people that live in it should be uppermost in the minds of decision-makers. The countries in the Sahel region of West Africa (Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) have abundant mineral resources: phosphates, gold, uranium, iron, manganese, zinc, copper, diamonds, coal — the list goes on. In their present predicament, the currency inflows that mining generates are an economic lifesaver, despite the threats it poses for the environment.

Soil degradation, pollution of surface waters and groundwater, destruction of natural habitat, and many other undesirable effects on people's health and well-being — these are some of the drawbacks of mineral extraction. According to agronomist Innocent Butaré, the IDRC Program Officer responsible for a study of the development of the mineral sector and the environment in the sub-Saharan countries of West Africa, "mineral exploitation has a serious impact on the environment, including the earth, the water, animal and plant resources, and human health, particularly when water becomes contaminated." The environment in the Sahel is already fragile, he notes, "and over and above the usual problems, those caused by mineral exploitation are generally irreversible."

Preventive approach

IDRC's approach is accordingly preventive: the study presents a survey of the situation and proposes solutions recommended by the consultants, to be adopted before matters go too far. The idea proposed to the political authorities in the countries involved is to research ways of extracting mineral wealth while preserving nature and social structures.

According to the final report prepared by consulting geologist O. François Ouedraogo, "the mineral sector of sub-Saharan Africa contributes to the diversity of economic and industrial activity in the countries in question. It constitutes a source of revenue and of hard currency, and helps create jobs." Mining regulations have been revised in many countries in order to attract foreign investment. The sub-Saharan region has considerable mineral potential, with world-class deposits of gold in Mali, uranium in Niger, and phosphates in Senegal already being exploited, as well as rich lodes of coal, attapulgite, industrial minerals, and building materials. However, much of the known and unknown mineral wealth remains to be explored and exploited.

History of mineral extraction

This part of Africa has a significant history of mineral extraction. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal, the presence of gold has been known for thousands of years, and traditional gold-washing activities have always existed. Mineral research begun in colonial times has continued here with bilateral and multilateral assistance, but Africa still has not attracted the large-scale private
investment that has occurred in other parts of the world, more because of various kinds of natural and political constraints than because of geological considerations.

Liberalization of markets and legislation favourable to investment passed over the last decade have led to a remarkable upsurge in the mineral sector, particularly in exploration for gold and diamonds. Policies favouring investment have been, or are about to be, put in place by the sub-Saharan countries, in addition to mining regulations that meet international standards, and liberal economic and fiscal policies. This has brought in such mineral multinationals as Anglo American Corporation, BHP, Gencor, Ashanti Goldfields, Barrick Gold, Rand Gold, and Placer Dome.

**Original goal**

Dr Butaré notes that IDRC's goal in conducting a study during this period of mineral resurgence in the Sahel, after inviting all the key players in the sector to a seminar in Dakar, was to "help countries to have access to the accurate basic information they need in order to make good policy in the mineral sector." The preliminary report of the study was reviewed at a meeting attended by representatives from mining and environmental regulators in each of the four countries involved, the public and private sectors, research and funding organizations, political circles, the African Development Bank, the World Bank, France, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire. The leader of the IDRC study believes it was important to invite everyone involved in the mineral sector to ensure a better grasp of the problem and a broader disclosure of the study's findings. Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire were invited in order to familiarize them with these issues before they become involved in the second phase of the project, launched in April 2000, which will also take in Ghana, Guinea, and the two Congos. In the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone, he notes, everything will depend on the situation in the hostilities now affecting those two countries.

The study gives much importance to the social dimension, particularly the situation of the traditional gold washers whose operations have expanded since the drought of 1984. Usually driven off from mineral sites by the large private corporations, they owe their survival to better organization, a more professional approach, laws to protect them, and better awareness of the need to preserve the environment in which they work. Hard labour by children, exploitation of women, hand-to-mouth poverty, promiscuity, prostitution, crime, epidemics, disease, AIDS, drugs, and alcohol: all of these are part of daily life for the gold washerman and their families. Former farmers and livestock raisers, they should return from time to time to their fields and their animals, in a context of diversification and alternative activities. There should also be a reforestation program.

**Impacts**

Discussion of Ouédraogo's report, based on data gathering and field visits to all four countries in October and November 1998, led to a number of conclusions and proposals for short-, mid- and long-term action. Revision of mining regulations is under way in Senegal and Niger to provide better protection for the environment where mining activities are taking place.

There are also proposals for the establishment of an environmental team within the ministry of mines of each country, and for the training of officials who will monitor mining activities. Dr Butaré foresees a problem here, because it is hard to find experts in Africa with knowledge of both the environment and mining. Governments need well-trained people able to verify compliance with environmental standards by both the gold washers and the big corporations, who are in fact paying more attention to these issues. The recommendations also cover organizational work, better information and education for women working in gold washing operations, and child care.
Official interest

Published early in 1999, the report has already attracted official interest. Mali has submitted practical suggestions for better health among the gold washers; Niger seeks help in organizing its gold prospectors; Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire are eager for the start of the second phase; and reaction is awaited from Burkina Faso and Senegal. The African Development Bank has already started work on impact studies, notes Dr Butaré, and he expresses the hope that this study will be useful to the entire continent of Africa, to help it exploit its immense wealth while safeguarding its men and women and preserving the environment in which they live.

A. Touré

For more information:

Dr Innocent Butaré, IDRC Program Officer, Avenue Cheik Anta Diop, Angle Boulevard de l'Est, BP 11007, CD Annexe, Dakar, Senegal; Email: ibutare@idrc.org.sn