



THE HUMAN COST OF MINING IN SENEGAL'S THIÈS REGION

“This land is our past, present, and future. But in a matter of days, it was taken from us without a voice, without a choice.” — Villager from Koudiadiène

INTRODUCTION

The Clash Between Progress and People

In Senegal, land isn't just an economic asset; it's life itself for many rural communities. For generations, the land has provided them with sustenance, culture, and identity. But the rise of mining activities, promoted as a driver of economic progress, has brought with it a dark shadow: land grabs and human rights violations. Nowhere is this conflict more apparent than in the villages surrounding the Thiès region, where the projects of SEPHOS and GCO, two major mining corporations, have sparked growing tensions.

The villages of Pambal, Koudiadiène, Lam-Lam, and others are on the frontlines of this conflict. Displacement, environmental degradation, and loss of livelihoods have become their new reality, as mining companies expand their operations, often with the endorsement of the government. The question is: at what cost?

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

A Region on the Edge

The Thiès region is a crucial area in Senegal's western heartland, connecting the capital Dakar with the country's interior. Known for its varied landscapes and abundant phosphate deposits, the region has become a hotspot for mining, particularly by SEPHOS, a subsidiary of FERTINAGRO NUTRIENTES, and GCO, a collaboration between the French group Eramet and Mineral Deposits Limited Senegal.

The local economy has traditionally relied on agriculture. Villagers grow crops like millet, tomatoes, and peanuts to feed their families and make a modest living. But their fragile economic balance has been thrown into chaos by mining operations that degrade the land and pollute water sources. For many, this is not just an environmental issue but a matter of survival.



THE LAND GRAB INCIDENT

A Community's Loss

In 2009, SEPHOS acquired a 500-hectare mining license, expanding into areas once used by the villagers for agriculture. GCO, a larger venture, took over mining rights initially held by the Senegalese company SSPT, with the government holding a 10% stake in the enterprise. While these acquisitions were legally sanctioned, the manner in which they were carried out has left a bitter taste in the mouths of those affected.

The acquisition process lacked transparency, and local communities had little to no say in what happened to their ancestral lands. Compensation was inadequate, and often, the loss of land meant the end of farming—leaving families without their primary source of income. "It's not just the land. It's our dignity they've taken," says one farmer from Lam-Lam.

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A Triple Threat

The economic impact of these mining projects is twofold. On one hand, the companies promised jobs for locals. But the reality has been far from this ideal. Most of the jobs offered are low-paying and often temporary, and the displacement of farming activities has left many without stable work. In fact, many families now face greater poverty, forcing some to migrate to urban areas in search of new opportunities—an option that often leads to even more precarious living conditions.

Socially, the impact is profound. Displacement uproots entire communities, forcing them into new environments where they struggle to adapt. Old social ties break down, and collective identities are weakened. "Before, we lived as one, but now we are scattered," reflects a villager from Diourmel.



Environmental degradation is perhaps the most immediate and visible consequence of the mining activities. Contaminated water from mining discharges seeps into local water sources, impacting both human health and agricultural productivity. "The water we drink is no longer clean. Our crops are dying, and so are we," laments a mother from Pambal. With their lands poisoned and livelihoods destroyed, communities face an uncertain future.

COMMUNITY RESISTANCE

Fighting for Survival

Despite the overwhelming challenges, these communities are not silent. Protests and demonstrations have become common as villagers seek to make their voices heard. Local organizations, often supported by NGOs, have played a vital role in helping the affected communities mobilize and advocate for their rights.



In 2019, a group of farmers from Koudiadiène led a protest to demand compensation and land restoration. "We are not against development, but it must respect our rights," declared one of the protest leaders. Their voices caught the attention of international organizations, bringing the plight of Senegalese communities to a global audience.

Community adaptation strategies have also emerged. Faced with the loss of farmland, some villagers have turned to alternative livelihoods such as small-scale commerce or crafts. But these efforts are often insufficient to replace what has been lost. For many, it's a desperate attempt to hold on to a way of life that is slowly slipping away.

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND NGOS

A Lifeline for Communities

International organizations and NGOs have been instrumental in supporting local communities in their fight for justice. They've helped raise awareness of the human rights violations happening in Senegal and have provided platforms for villagers to tell their stories on the global stage. These organizations also assist in mobilizing resources for legal action and environmental rehabilitation.

The collaboration between local associations and international advocacy groups has been crucial in producing reports that shine a light on the human cost of mining. One such report by CICODEV Africa in 2015 detailed the environmental destruction caused by phosphate mining in Koudiadiène, bringing international pressure on mining companies to reform their practices.



LESSONS LEARNED AND THE PATH FORWARD

Hope Amidst the Struggle

This case illustrates several key lessons. First, community mobilization is essential. In the villages of Koudiadiène, Pambal, and Diogo, the power of collective action has been a crucial tool in holding mining companies accountable. Second, collaboration between civil society organizations, human rights groups, and advocacy bodies is necessary to ensure that the voices of local communities are amplified.

However, there are significant challenges that need to be addressed. One of the biggest issues is the lack of recognition of customary land rights. Senegal's legal framework does not sufficiently protect these rights, leaving communities vulnerable to land grabs. Environmental degradation and health impacts from mining activities continue to plague the region, while compensation procedures remain inadequate and fail to address the long-term needs of the affected populations.

Moving forward, several recommendations are critical. First, the Senegalese government must put in place stronger mechanisms to protect the land and water rights of local communities. Second, international cooperation is necessary to hold mining companies like SEPHOS and GCO accountable for their social and environmental responsibilities. Finally, a more transparent and inclusive approach to mining development is needed, one that genuinely involves the communities who will be most affected by these projects.

CONCLUSION

The story of SEPHOS and GCO's mining activities in Senegal's Thiès region is a cautionary tale of how economic development can come at the expense of human rights. For the villagers of Koudiadiène, Pambal, and other affected areas, the consequences of mining have been devastating—displacement, poverty, environmental degradation, and loss of identity.

Yet, amid this struggle, there is hope. Through grassroots mobilization, community resilience, and international support, these communities continue to fight for their rights and for a future where development does not mean destruction. The road ahead is long, but with sustained pressure and advocacy, there is a chance to create a more just and equitable model of development for Senegal and beyond.

The time for responsible mining is now. For the sake of these communities, for the sake of future generations, we must listen to their voices and act.



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This document includes key findings of the FIAN International report [“Expropriation and Extractivism in Senegal: The cases of Koudiadiene, Pambal and Diogo.”](#)

WHO IS AFSA?

AFSA brings small-scale farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, faith groups, consumers, youth and activists from across the continent of Africa to create a united and louder voice for food sovereignty.

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