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Opinion

Reconciling Mining and Sustainable Development in Gabon: The ZEIS-SFN Model

Médard Obiang Ebanega*

Université Omar Bongo, Département de Géographie, Gabon

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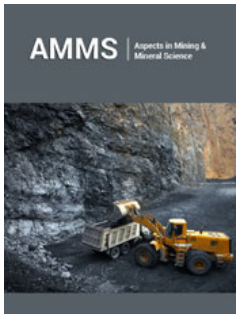

***Corresponding author:** Médard Obiang Ebanega, Université Omar Bongo, Département de Géographie, Gabon

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Opinion

Central African countries such as Gabon are free from significant biological, mining, gas and oil resources, the exploitation of which is accompanied by negative social, economic and environmental impacts. For this country, the problem is how to reconcile the exploitation of mineral wealth, the protection of the environment, the conservation of biodiversity and the preservation of the integrity of the populations? In this article, we examine the case of Gabon by highlighting the particularity of this country, its mining status, the main lines of the evolution of its mining history and a sketch of the negative social, economic and environmental impacts as detailed in many works. After these steps and after having identified the limits of the solutions that have been applied to date to minimize these impacts, we propose an alternative likely to promote mining in line with the sustainable development objectives of this country. A sub-Saharan African country of 267,667km2, crossed in the middle by the equator and located on the Atlantic coast in the Gulf of Guinea, Gabon is a former French colony, independent since 1960. It is a sparsely populated country with 1,811,079 inhabitants (RGPL-2013). 87% of its population is concentrated in cities which represent only 1.1% of the territory. It is a forest, oil and mining country committed to the preservation of the environment and climate change adaptation or mitigation. The exploitation of mineral wealth (manganese, niobium, gold and uranium) represents just over 6.2% of exports for a contribution of 5% to GDP. The mining research work carried out within an institutional framework or by private companies confirms the strong mining potential of Gabon's subsoil. Gabon is therefore a country of mining production in which projects are currently being developed for iron, manganese, talc, potash and other evaporites, phosphate carbonatite, niobium, rare earths, gold and diamond.

Gabon's mineral resources have been exploited since the colonial period in an industrial and artisanal way. The Compagnie des Mines d'Uranium de Françeville (COMUF) created by the initiative of the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) in 1958 has, for example, had two large uranium and manganese mines since its creation. The Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué (COMILOG), a subsidiary of the French group ERAMET and the Gabonese State, began mining manganese in Moanda in 1960. While reports of the existence of uranium deposits date back in the 1930s. Like industrial mining activities, artisanal mining began in colonial times. Gold mining, which today employs up to 10,000 people, began in 1937. It is developing in the South (provinces of Ogooué Lolo and Ngounié), the North-East (province of Ogooué Ivindo) and in the North (province of Woleu Ntem). Alongside gold, there is also the diamond which is exploited in an artisanal and informal way. Indeed, diamond mining in Gabon is limited to several hundred artisans operating without real estate control. These are installed in the regions of Mitzic, Makongonio, Nzenzélé Waka and Makokou. Gabon's diamond potential has interested companies such as DeBeers, Southerna, Matopa, which have conducted exploration campaigns. The permits that had been allocated to them fell back into the public domain. In Gabon, mining has undergone significant transformations. One of them concerns the arrival in the field of private or public-law Asian industrialists. From 2005, China Engineering and

Machinery Corporation, Xuzhou Huayuan and Ningbo Huaneng Kuangye obtained mining permits (manganese, iron). The other highlight is Gabon's adherence to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2004, even if it has so far failed to meet the requirements (Figure 1). In 2011, the Gabonese State created the Société Equatoriale de Mines (SM) to better secure the participation of the State in mining development in Gabon. In 2018, it fixed in a decree its adherence to the Kimberley process, which allows it to hope to officially become a diamond-producing country. It's also worth noting that improvements were introduced in the mining code in 2019. The new code clarifies the rules of mining and provides a more stable framework for investors. Investors are, in addition, required to carry out an Environmental and Social Impact Study approved by the Ministry for the Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources, Forestry and the Sea and by the Ministry of Mines.

Figure 1: Environmental Impact of gold exploitation at Minkié in North Gabon 2020.

The development of the Gabonese mining sector, whether industrial or artisanal, is accompanied by a significant increase in social, economic and environmental impacts. Veit Sebastian (2010), Kirsten Hund and Carole Megevand (2013), Ken Matthysen & Iain Clarkson (2013) George Belmond TCOUMBA (2020), INTERPOL (2021) give many details on the negative consequences of mining. On the social level, we find the impacts on health, the impoverishment of communities, conflicts, crime and acculturation. Economically, mining enriches developed countries, multinationals, some local elites to the detriment of the State, communities and populations. From an environmental point of view, mining constitutes a danger for protected areas and the conservation of biodiversity. Mining activities contribute to exacerbating competing land uses with agriculture, forestry and conservation. Its implementation affects air quality, water quality and soil quality. Mining activities produce waste, polluting discharges whose management is neglected especially in a context of institutional failure and inability of public authorities to exercise surveillance, control and impose sanctions on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the insufficient weight of the NGOs to be able to make the legitimate demands of the communities heard. In Gabon, several solutions are proposed to move towards the reconciliation of mining and sustainable development. Let's note that Gabon now formally adheres to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and the Kimberley Process (KP). Added to this are the ecological requirements imposed by financial institutions before financing a project, namely a mandatory Environmental and Social Impact assessment before initiating a mining project, and the payment of 1 to 5% of the proceeds into two CSR development projects. In the field, these solutions do not achieve the expected results. Not only does Gabon fail to meet all of the criteria for its membership of the EITI and the KP, but it also turns out that the ecological requirements of the donors, the ESIAs and the contributions to the FRI and the FRS do not are well applied in the field. In view of the above, we propose that for the next few decades, Gabon, which has opted for the development of Special Economic and Industrial Zones, adapts this approach to its context and takes into account the will of the international community to fight against the climate change and loss of biodiversity. Concretely, we advocate the creation of a new kind of exclusive economic zone in which we would promote nature-based solutions integrating digital and green technologies, and, above all, promoting the satisfaction of the needs of local communities.