

Open pit mine in Prestea, Ghana.
OLIVER ASSELIN/GLOBAL AWARE

In Debt to Water: Ghana, Gold, and Debt

“In Ghana, where I come from, water distribution is a challenge. Depending on the region and the area where you live, one may have access or no access to water.” Baffour Doki Amo

IN COLONIAL TIMES, GHANA WAS KNOWN AS THE GOLD Coast. Its wealth attracted the attention of European colonizers, and to this day it hosts dozens of foreign-owned gold mines. It also has rich farmland, timber, access to the sea, and strong social movements determined to lift the country out of poverty. So why does poverty persist amidst a great wealth of resources?

Like many African countries, Ghana's rich resource base has been no match for its massive debt to international lenders. With that debt come widespread poverty and its unwelcome attendants, including limited access to water — especially clean water. In both rural and urban areas, access to water is a hard-fought battle.

Throughout urban Africa, struggles against the privatization of water services have become common. Uganda, South Africa, and Ghana have all faced this fight, and in every case both corporations and international bodies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have been behind the privatization push. Privatization is often a feature of the “structural adjustment programs” required by international financial institutions when a country restructures its debt.

Baffour Doki Amo, Secretary General of the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa notes, “In the urban centres, colonial pipelines cannot transport sufficient quantities of water to the ever-increasing urban populations.” Cash-strapped governments in the “Third” and “First” Worlds alike can relate to this observation. When needs outstrip aging pipes and pumps, turning to a private company with deep pockets can look like the best, or only, way forward. Many African governments face direct pres-

sure to privatize major public utilities.

In Ghana's case, it took a massive effort by everyone from students to women's and church groups to stop the privatization of the water services in the capital city of Accra. “Disturbed by the potential consequence of the unjust policy of privatization without human welfare considerations”, Baffour tells us, “the civil society and faith-based organizations in Ghana mounted a sustained public campaign against water privatization, prompting the company to go back to the drawing board.”

Thousands took to the streets in a broad-based and well-organized movement that is an excellent model for

North Americans facing similar struggles.

On the other side of the water coin is the reality that even basic access to clean water is a struggle for most rural Ghanaians. Baffour notes that “In the Northern Region of Ghana ... women with babies at their backs are compelled to walk long distances in search of water. The water they have access to sometimes has to be shared with their cattle and other animals. The risk of infection and contracting diseases is a daily occurrence.”



Pumping water in the mining town of Prestea, western Ghana.
Olivier Asselin/Global Aware

Throughout the world, communities are finding that the struggle for public, affordable water services can be undermined by human activities that pollute the water at its source or outright destroy watersheds. Keeping natural



Open pit mine in Prestea, Ghana.
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By Baffour Dokyi Ainoa and Julie Graham

water sources free of contamination is never easy, and the sheer number of mines in Ghana makes the job even harder. And if mining is among the greatest single causes of water contamination, gold mining ranks among the worst offenders.

Modern gold mining in Ghana means open pit mining, which requires the stripping away of thousands of acres of productive agricultural land. An OXFAM America report notes that in Western Ghana, “Farmlands, collectively owned in accordance with tradition, have been ceded to transnational mining interests ... Farmers complained that their homes and fields have been displaced or destroyed by mining activities. Others said their water sources have been contaminated, leading to a dramatic rise in illness related to exposure to dangerous chemicals and heavy metals. The destruction of agricultural lands has resulted in a growing dependency on mining at the community level, but few real jobs are available for unskilled local people.”¹

Land loss is bad enough, but community groups have reported numerous cyanide spills that have killed off large numbers of fish and shellfish, and contaminated the rivers and streams on which people depend for drinking water and agriculture. (Try this — type “Ghana, cyanide” into Google and see how many hits you get.)

In June of 2006 yet another cyanide leak took place, this time from Bogoso Gold Limited (BGL), a subsidiary of the US/Canadian mining company Golden Star Resources. This prompted the regional coalition WACAM (Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining) to note that it is “of the opinion that BGL has not learnt any lesson from the previous cyanide spillages because it has an easy way out of the problem through community manipulation that divides the ranks of the people, and (through) the exploitation of the weak regulatory framework, which does not hold mining companies accountable for environmental accidents like cyanide spillage.”

Just as keeping water public demanded a broad coalition, so too does the fight against poor and unregulated mining practices. Ghanaians have created strong, broad community coalitions to respond to this enormous challenge. We can learn from them — a big part of their work

WHAT WE CAN DO

SIGN the KAIROS “Counting On Water” action for legislation requiring Canadian corporations to protect water and human rights. See www.kairoscanada.org or call toll free: 1-877-403-8933, extension 241.

SUPPORT the debt cancellation movement. Check out the debt section on the KAIROS website and sign up for the KAIROS Debt E-bulletin (contact jdillon@kairoscanada.org).

LEARN more about peoples’ movements throughout Africa. See Africa Files: www.africafiles.org

CONNECT to our members’ work on binding legislation including Development and Peace at www.dev.org, and The United Church of Canada at www.united-church.ca

is our work too. Canadian mining companies operate in Ghana, and so do the structural adjustment programs supported by our government. Canadians are having an impact throughout the world, but that impact is too often negative.

1. Excerpted from “The Day Gold Lost Its Glitter”, Andres McKinley, copyright OXFAM America: www.oxfamamerica.org

Recommended resources

(available on the KAIROS 2006-07 CD or on the sites listed):

Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining (WACAM): www.wacam.org

No Dirty Gold campaign: www.nodirtygold.org
(See “Community Voices”)

Mining Watch (Canada): Ghana focus page
www.miningwatch.ca/index.php?/Ghana

Africa Files (Canada) resource extraction pages are good for updates and research projects:
www.africafiles.org/resource.asp