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Regassa, Asebe

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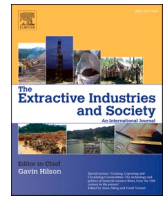


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Original article

# Frontiers of Extraction and Contestation: dispossession, exclusion and local resistance against MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine, southern Ethiopia

Asebe Regassa\*

University of Zurich, Political Geography Unit, Switzerland



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## ABSTRACT

Resource frontiers in Ethiopia have served as spaces of state power consolidation and wealth accumulation and as manifestations of asymmetrical power relations between state and society. Successive Ethiopian regimes pursued high-modernist development models under broader narratives of civilizing 'backward' societies and 'transforming' 'unproductive' spaces into productive resources. Although much of state intervention in the pastoralist frontiers was effected through large-scale commercial farming, extractive industries have become another dimension of frontier expansion. Ethiopia's liberalization of its mining economy in the 1990s has attracted private investors to the politically marginalized peripheries in the country. Accordingly, MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine, the largest private gold-producing company in the country, was in 1997 granted a 20-year lease over 485 km<sup>2</sup> of land in Guji zone, Oromia National Regional State. The company soon developed an exclusionary approach in its relations with local communities with little investment in social services, local employment and environmental sustainability. On the contrary, its strong link to the macro-political order and reliance on coercive power in subduing local resistance enabled it to create an enclave where it operated without accountability for two decades. This paper analyzes the interplay between the macro-political order and local practices and power constellations at the mining site, and how such interplay reconfigured state-society relations, leading to conflict and eventual suspension of the mining company's license in May 2018. The paper argues that the company's exclusionary approach was rooted within the political formation of the Ethiopian state that considers such territories as resource frontiers (full of resources but empty of people). The paper asks how questions of entitlement at the local level, mining micro politics, and the national political order are entangled and produce different forms of contestation and negotiation. It concludes that this entanglement shapes how mining companies operate and also how states formulate mining policies.

## 1. Introduction

In May 2018, only a month after Abiy Ahmed became the Prime Minister of Ethiopia through popular protest, another protest broke out in Guji zone of Oromia National Regional State against the federal government's renewal of MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine's license for another ten years. There had been widespread reports of the environmental damage caused by the mine, and the negative impacts it was having on people's health and livelihoods in the surrounding areas. The company running the mine, MIDROC Gold Mine, is the largest private gold mining company in Ethiopia. Although the protest was coercively crushed after the government military killed four protestors and injured twelve individuals, the popular discontent prompted the government to suspend the renewal of the license and close the mining site. The federal

government in Addis Ababa promised the public that the mine would not be reopened until there had been a transparent and scientific investigation into the mine's alleged impacts on neighbouring communities (Gilbert and Regassa 2019). According to a report in *The New Humanitarian*, toxic chemicals released from the mine over the twenty years of its operation have damaged the health and life of local communities. Heavy metals deposited in nearby rivers and streams that people use for both human and animal consumption have caused physical deformities, paralysis, stillbirths, miscarriages and deaths (Gardner 2020).

In Ethiopia, Guji zone has historically been represented as a mineral zone of Ethiopia with huge deposits of precious minerals such as gold, tantalum and emeralds. The area has long been a mining frontier from where fortune seekers, the state and private companies sought to amass

\* Corresponding author. Phone: 0041 775292891

E-mail addresses: [asebe2011@gmail.com](mailto:asebe2011@gmail.com), [asebe.debelo@geo.uzh.ch](mailto:asebe.debelo@geo.uzh.ch).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2021.100980>

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rich bounties (Shah 2012). As Shah (2012: 77) writes, “Adola greenstone belt is Ethiopia’s richest gold seam” to which Ethiopians from all corners of the country flocked in search of wealth. It is within such broader representation of the area as a resource frontier—a space of bounty—that I will critically analyze the entanglement between mining projects and micro and macro political dynamics in Ethiopia. I argue that the framing of the area around the gold mine as a frontier zone has been used as a justification for the creation of a securitised enclave of the mine. I explain how this enclave is entangled in the broader political economy of Ethiopia and challenge ideas of the enclave as detached from wider political orders. I then analyze how the mine’s impact is felt locally, and how production has affected the livelihoods and life chances of communities living around it.

Data for this paper were collected during different rounds of fieldwork in 2018 and 2019. Interviews were conducted with artisanal miners, former employees of Adola Gold Mine, MIDROC Gold Mine CEO and employees, government authorities at different levels of the state structure and local community members in the vicinities of the concession site. In addition, the views and perspectives of elders, women and youth in the locality were included through focus group discussions. The informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge about the subject either as members of local communities, or due to their work experience in the company or in government offices. I also relied on my personal observation of victims, mine dumps and tailing dams, streams used for human and livestock consumption and an enclaved residential home of the company’s employees. In addition, some archival materials from the federal Ministry of Mines and Petroleum were used to substantiate empirical data from the field.

Following this introductory section, the second part of this paper presents the conceptual framework of the paper situating my argument in recent debates on frontier zones and extractive enclaves. In the third part, the context of the study is discussed with some historical background on contemporary mining operations in the area. In the fourth part, the entanglement of MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine in the national political economy is articulated. Lastly, dynamics of dispossession, exclusion and resistance are analyzed drawing on empirical data and conceptual debates around resource frontiers and mining enclaves, and a brief conclusion is given.

## 2. The gold rush: frontiers and mining enclaves/(dis)entanglement

To examine the gold rush in Ethiopia’s Guji zone and MIDROC’s socially exclusionary and environmentally destructive mining operation, I am looking at debates around two broad concepts: *resource frontiers* and *mining enclaves/(dis)entanglement*. First, I discuss how the notion of resource frontier provides discursive legitimization of resource appropriation and dispossession under the rubric of improvement (Li 2007; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). Secondly, I examine how extractive enclaves are entangled in wider political orders. I emphasize mining operations’ duality—as secluded, bounded and territorialized practices, on the one hand, and also as indiscrete spaces entangled into micro and macro socio-political forces and processes on the other hand (Cote and Korf 2018).

From the resource frontiers perspective, in the Ethiopian context, frontier imagination is rooted in the country’s history of state building and power consolidation commenced in the late 19th century through wars of conquest waged by the Christian highland kingdom over diverse groups in the western, southern and eastern parts of the country (Donham 1986; Markakis 2011). As a legitimizing strategy of the empire building project, the architects of the modern Ethiopian empire and scholars subscribing to the project portrayed the conquest as a civilizing mission (Tibebu 1995). Eventually, a north-south discursive dichotomy evolved in historical, cultural and political representations of spaces and people as civilized versus uncivilized, modernized versus backward, cradles of history versus homes of noble savage (Marzagora 2017;

Ullendorff 1965). This notion of depicting the conquered regions as backward, uncivilized and empty spaces awaiting the hands of the ‘civilized’, ‘modernized’ and sedentarized society is embedded in the cultural and political identity of the Ethiopian state that continues to influence contemporary political and development discourses (Markakis 2011; Turton 2011). Markakis (2011) further problematizes Ethiopia’s frontier narrative as a political project articulated as an instrument of resource capture. With the launching of development projects such as hydroelectric dams and irrigation projects in the peripheries, the pastoralist frontiers have become the center of state interest leading to an increased state presence (Abbink 2012; Regassa et al. 2018).

In this regard, the state has continued to project the dominant discourse of transforming ‘underutilized’ and ‘unproductive’ spaces to productive resources in its economic policies (GTP 2010). States and non-state development actors often articulate narratives of improvement as a strategy of legitimating resource appropriation within broader developmental discourses (Li 2007). Writing about competing representations of Lower Omo Valley in Ethiopia, Turton (2011) elucidates that the valley that is perceived, experienced and lived-in as a home, sacred space and ancestral land for indigenous societies is portrayed by the Ethiopian state as wasteland, a potentially resourceful wilderness awaiting the hands of developmental actors. Projected and imagined from the center—the center representing both political and geographical spaces—Ethiopia’s peripheries are viewed as power vacuums and places of refuge for criminals from the highlands, and yet also spaces of fortune rich with resources.

The location of the Laga-Dambi Gold Mine has long been framed as a resource frontier. Fortune seekers used to flock to the Shakiso area in Guji zone expecting to transform their life through the wealth of the gold. The words of an artisanal miner elucidate how Shakiso and its environs are represented as spaces of bounty:

Everywhere in this land, gold was plenty. One can easily get gold from rocks, underground and by sieving the muddy water along the streams. My friends and I came fifty years ago following the story about the abundance of gold here. Some people benefited but others, including myself, were not fortunate (former migrant artisanal miner, Shakiso, April 2019).

The imagination and representation of Shakiso as a resource frontier is also part of the government’s development narrative. In an interview, a top government official in the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum stated:

Shakiso and its environs is a naturally endowed area with different types of minerals. But the area has not been well utilized. If properly utilized, it could transform the country’s economy and could improve the life of local communities but activists and politicians are becoming hindrances to the development and utilization of the resources (Government official, Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Addis Ababa, August 2019).

Representations and imaginaries of resource frontiers as spaces of bounty, fortune, and underutilized resources are reproduced by a range of actors—state officials, private companies and fortune-seeking individuals. Such narratives and imaginaries about the resourcefulness of spaces have been part of broader frontier-making projects through dispossession and wealth accumulation in different parts of the world. They are often accompanied by a reckless rush to amass the bounty, causing a range of negative socioeconomic effects and damage to human health and the environment (Korf et al., 2015; Mennell 2015; Rasmussen and Lund 2018). From a modernist development perspective, resource frontiers such as mineral deposits, agricultural areas, forests and fishing grounds are considered bounties to be grabbed, extracted and accumulated through assemblage of capital, labor, science and technology (Harvey 2003; Lesutis 2019). As geographical imaginaries of spaces to be captured, exploited and harnessed for wealth accumulation, resource frontiers constitute discursive processes of nullifying

existing land rights, livelihoods and social relations, and thus legitimize dispossession. Land appropriation, whether for large-scale agribusiness, mining, nature conservation, or logging, often entails violent forms of enclosure and exclusion (Li 2014; Lund 2011). Especially in contexts of authoritarian state systems, these processes of enclosure also constitute acts of displacement, which in turn amounts to disconnection of people from their cultural, economic and spiritual spaces (Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Regassa et al. 2018).

The second conceptual debate I address in this paper is the nature of mining enclaves and their (dis)entanglement with local and extra-local dynamics. The debate on mining enclaves continues to dominate social science research in the field (Rubbers 2019a). On the one hand, some consider extractive enclaves as territorially bounded, and socially, infrastructurally and economically disconnected from local communities (Appel 2012; Ferguson 2005). Within the context of oil enclaves in Equatorial Guinea, Appel (2012) succinctly argues that infrastructural disentanglement of the oil company from the local society—where it is in practice deeply embedded—is a form of violence that consolidates its extractive power. On the other hand, emerging perspectives on enclaves treat the concept not as a complete disentanglement of extractive industries from local political, economic and social contexts, rather as indiscrete sites entangled with local micro politics and socioeconomic relations (Cote and Korf 2018; Lesutis 2019). Building on Lesutis (2019) and Cote and Korf (2018), who argue that extractive industries are not discrete entities disconnected from local and extra-local political, social and economic dynamics, I extend their arguments by examining how concession sites manifest features of both enclavement and entanglement.

Although concession sites may be physically enclosed, entailing exclusion and inclusion, the flow of people, ideas, information, materials and consequences to and from the sites transcends the physical enclosures and entangles the mining sites with external forces and relations. Thus, it is imperative to underpin the duality of mining concessions as both enclaved extraction and entangled activities. On the one hand, mining operations become enclaves or exclusionary spaces of extraction, dispossession and capital accumulation entailing both physical and discursive disconnections from local contexts (Lesutis 2019; Harvey 2003). On the other hand, such operations are entangled with micro political processes, systems and actors as capital, labor, political decisions and economic regulations operate beyond bounded or enclaved spatial limits. In fact, although extractive industries often disconnect themselves from local economic development, their presence in local communities is visible in terms of their negative impacts—being catalysts for environmental pollution, crime, cultural spoilage and poverty. Rubbers (2019a) further elucidates that in their quest for securitization of their concessions, mining companies sometimes strengthen, rather than loosen, their entanglement in the local social and political environment through corporate social responsibility initiatives and payments to local political and customary leaders to transform the areas around their concessions into a ‘protection belt’.

The entanglement of neoliberal capitalist processes with local and national political forces often makes extractive projects spaces of friction, contestation, conflict and socioeconomic despair depending on how such sectors are governed (Tsing 2005). However, as power relations between private, multinational corporations and states, on the one hand, and local communities, on the other, are often asymmetrically configured, extractive industries are rarely held accountable for the negative environmental, health and socioeconomic impacts of their activities. Some scholars use the term “resource curse” to refer to the fact that despite the abundance of natural resources, many developing countries suffer from conflicts over such resources (Tiba and Frikha 2019; Azarya 2003). Some scholars argue that the abundance of mining resources has negative consequences on local communities as well as macro and meso-level socioeconomic and political stability (Goumandakoye, 2016; Guan, et al., 2020; Tiba and Frikha 2019). In this regard, the economic motivations behind frontier expansion and

hegemonic discourses that nullify local peoples’ right of resource ownership prepare the ground for extractive projects’ exclusionary practices in creating enclave production. In doing so, frontier expansion decimates local peoples’ livelihoods and health. Gilberthorpe and Papyrakis (2015) call for a nuanced analysis of the complex political, geographical, economic and other interconnected local and extra-local factors. That is why I am analysing the MIDROC project in the context of Ethiopia’s macro political economy as well as local level politics and community wellbeing. In doing so, I am delving into the specific discourses and political relationships that lie behind the problems of the MIDROC mine.

In Ethiopia, although extractive industries have not been given special attention in the economic policy of the country under the previous regimes, they have more recently been framed as promising sectors, particularly under the last two consecutive Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I and II) launched since 2010. Successive regimes have however considered gold mining in particular as a potential way to boost the economy of the country. In addition, control over gold mining areas has been not only a source of revenue but a symbolic representation of state prestige particularly under the imperial regime. In the 1930s, during the Italian occupation, gold deposits were discovered in today’s Guji zone around Shakiso district (Mekonnen 2017). The discovery and operation of the gold mine, formerly called Adola Gold Mining, made the Guji zone one of the mining frontiers in the country under the successive regimes. As I discussed earlier, resource extraction from the conquered regions in the form of mining, livestock raids, honey harvesting, taxation and conscripted labor served as mechanisms of state power consolidation for the successive Ethiopian regimes (Holcomb and Ibsa 1990; Strecker 2014). In this context, I argue that the current practices of dispossession and exclusion of local communities, as well as unaccounted human and environmental health impacts by MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine, are extensions of the central state’s political and economic domination of people in the Ethiopia’s peripheries.

### 3. The context

The gold mine near Adola and Shakiso districts has been the largest extractive project in Ethiopia since its opening in the 1930s. Adola Gold Deposit was first discovered in the 1930s during the Italian occupation and was developed by the imperial regime as the private property of the emperor. To signify the contribution of the gold resource to the imperial treasury, Adola town was renamed *Kibre Mengist*—literally meaning the prestige/honor of the state—representing the bounty of wealth the emperor accumulated from the area. In the public narrative, however, the name of the town (Adola and later including Shakiso) signified terror in the form of forcible recruitment of labor, the condition of penal servitude that prevailed in the labor camp, and the coercive measures taken against local people. Adola Gold Mine was considered a place of exile and punishment as well as an area where people were killed for the sake of creating strict control over the gold (Alazar 1998; Bahru 2002; Dambe 2018). Forced laborers used to warn of the hardships of Adola with a saying:

*“Gifaa bili Adola*

*Anes bili akkafa*

*Lela mini yimexali!”*

This means ‘if the worst comes, I will be taken to Adola [for gold mining], if the lesser evil happens, I will be given spade [to work in state farm], nothing more would happen’. Labourers were conscripted or came as fortune seekers and were taken to labor camps established at some 20 km to the south of Adola, now called Shakiso. Migrant workers increased in number from time to time and eventually established the town of Shakiso though there had also been settlements of such workers

in nearby places including Goraa, Gay'o, Baddaa-keessa, Jiboota, Reejji, Ceekataa, Daawwaa and Haya Diimaa (Mokonnen 2017; Shah 2012). Although the mining concession created an enclave in terms of its contributions to the local economy, it depended on these settlement areas and surrounding local villages for its labor force.

Securitization of the mining site started as early as it began operation. Soon after the liberation of Ethiopia from Italy in 1941, about 900 soldiers led by one of the prominent royal officials, Dajjazimach Kabada Buzunesh, were stationed in the area for the mission of securitizing the mining operation (Mekonnen 2017). Under the imperial and military regimes, the gold mining right was exclusively controlled by the government, and local people were forbidden from extracting gold. As a result, the practice of *'abbaa follossaa'*—the local Oromo term for artisanal mining—was declared illegal (Damise, 2000). Criminalization of artisanal mining not only deprived local people of access to resources but also exposed them to state violence. For the local Guji Oromo, life under the military regime was particularly painful as people were killed, tortured and displaced from their home as a process of securitization of the mining site. If artisanal miners digging for gold, farmers collecting coffee or herders herding cattle were found in the proximity of the territorialized area, the security personnel would shoot them without any investigation.

Elders from Guji zone and surrounding areas have painful memories about violent mineral extraction during the imperial and military periods. Any person who passed through the mining zones of Shakiso and Adola was forced to stay three nights at a place designated for inspecting, filtering and controlling gold smuggling. One of the strategies used for inspection was forcing people to drink a traditional medicine used against tapeworm (*kooso*). After drinking the medicine in heavy concentration, which leads to diarrhea, the people were forced to provide evidence that they had not swallowed gold. To do so, travelers were forced to sieve their stools in the presence of a camp leader/inspector; only when their stools were confirmed free from gold would they be given permission to proceed with their travel.

As part of its privatization policy, the EPRDF government transferred Adola Gold Mining enterprise to MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine PLC in 1997 through a 20-year concession (Dambe 2018). MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine PLC is a privately owned company and part of the MIDROC Group conglomerate. MIDROC Group companies are engaged in multi-sector investments across Africa, Europe, the Middle East and North America. In Ethiopia, the Group's companies are engaged in agriculture and agro-industry, construction, hotels and tourism, manufacturing, mining, oil and gas distribution, real estate development, transport (including air transport), trade and commerce, healthcare, and education and training.<sup>1</sup>

The company initially started operating on 88km<sup>2</sup> but the concession area was soon expanded to 485km<sup>2</sup> – a process which local communities and local government authorities complain was carried out without their consent. The mining license was given to the company by the Ministry of Mining at the federal level, and thus neither Oromia regional state and its local authorities nor local communities were consulted during the process. Soon after it got the land through concession, MIDROC pursued displacing, dispossessing and systematically excluding local communities from job opportunities. Due to toxic chemicals from the industry that polluted downstream rivers, local communities and their livestock faced deadly health consequences. The dispossession of local communities from their resources, coercive measures against trespassers and health problems caused by toxic chemicals from the mining site all hint at continuities of the discursive imaginations of resource frontiers shaping the country's political-economy in the peripheries. This will be analyzed in the section below.

#### 4. The political economy of Laga-Dambi Gold Mine

Laga-Dambi Gold Mine has been a manifestation of the macro-political economy in Ethiopia whereby state and state-affiliated companies expropriate resources through violence and bureaucratic leverage. Under the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) dominated government that ruled the country from 1991, individuals and companies with strong political affiliation to the party secured easy access to resources without due bureaucratic procedures (Regassa et al., 2018). Over the last two decades, large tracts of land in the pastoral and agro-pastoral areas such as Afar, Gambella, Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, Somali and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' regional states have been leased out to private companies (Tura 2018; Markakis 2011).

Likewise, the federal government transferred the Laga-Dambi gold mining site to MIDROC PLC in 1997 without a transparent procedure; neither local communities nor government authorities in Oromia were consulted. According to a former Shakiso district administrator, the local government was simply ordered to restrict local communities from trespassing into the mining site, which was at the time not clearly demarcated. Local informants also unanimously asserted in interviews that they only heard about the transfer of the mining site from the government to the private company when MIDROC began imposing strict regulations preventing farmers and artisan miners from accessing resources in areas it claimed were included within its concession boundaries. Local accounts indicate that the company began exercising brute force on local communities to the extent of jailing, torturing and killing people on allegations of trespassing into concession sites. According to a former guard at the MIDROC site, "MIDROC was like a dictatorial government by itself. Nobody can ask why its security officers arrest, kill, or torture locals. It has a strong bond with higher government officials at federal level. Our officials at district and zone levels did not have any power". He continued:

Some ten years ago, a young man was drowned into the toxic tailing dam while trying to escape from the company's security personnel. They were shooting at him, chasing him with gunfire, and unfortunately, the guy died. Following his death villagers tried to protest demanding justice for the young man but MIDROC informed the federal government and got additional military force who began beating, arresting and torturing people. Nobody could speak against the company, it was powerful and brutal (anonymous former employee, March 2019, Shakiso).

MIDROC's monopoly of power over local communities and their resources reflects Ethiopia's post-1991 politico-economic order that was highly controlled by the TPLF/EPRDF party/government. As stated above, private companies affiliated to the party were given administrative, financial and technical leverage in land acquisition, importation of materials, and production and export of outputs, and MIDROC was well positioned in this regard. Unlike other contexts where multinational extractive projects consolidate the creation of mining enclaves in the absence of the state (Ferguson 2005), the Ethiopian federal government supports MIDROC in two ways. Firstly, it uses its coercive power in crushing local resistance against the company, and secondly, the government neither discharges responsibilities to the company nor makes it accountable for its destructive impacts.

During the period it held the license for the mine, MIDROC produced significant quantities of gold from the area. The company does not however have a transparent reporting system about its production and income. A 2014 report produced by MIDROC Company<sup>2</sup> revealed that its annual gold production has been on average 4.5 tons of gold, and from

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.midroc-ethiopia.com.et>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Event/Africa/Ethiopia%20Extractive%20Industries%20Forum%202014/5a\\_MIDROC.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Event/Africa/Ethiopia%20Extractive%20Industries%20Forum%202014/5a_MIDROC.pdf)

1998 to 2014 alone, the company had generated 17,168,007,555 birr from the sale of gold and 80,671,938 birr from silver (i.e. about USD 1249,428,016 from gold and USD 5860,253 from silver).<sup>3</sup> This means the company had accumulated a total revenue of 17,248,679,493 birr (USD 1255,288,269) in 16.4 years and had been generating 1051,748,749 birr per annum, and could contribute to the national economy if properly managed. Although the transparency of the company in reporting the exact figure of its production and revenue remains questionable, this income by itself is significant. While it requires empirical data to verify, undoubtedly, there is no district in the country comparable to Oddo Shakiso where the mining site is located in its capacity to generate 1.05 billion birr from gold and silver alone.

Although it is the largest extractive project in the country, MIDROC's contribution to local economic development, social infrastructure and environmental health has been at best insignificant or at worst destructive. MIDROC's lack of contribution to the local economy echoes studies on how extractive enclaves tend to marginalize local communities in their quest for strengthening enclave production (Auty 2006). According to an interview with an expert in the Oromia revenue authority, none of the revenues from MIDROC went to Oromia regional state. Data from the federal Ministry of Revenues also shows that revenues collected from MIDROC, like any other company, are sent to the federal Ministry of Finance and Economic Development but not earmarked to any particular region. This echoes the centralised political economy in Ethiopia where, despite the apparently decentralised system of government, the 'developmental state' economic model instituted a top-down and authoritarian system (Weldegiorgis, et al., 2017).

Likewise, in an interview with the company's CEO in March 2019, it came out that the company uses the absence of any legal framework on corporate social responsibility as a strategy to escape from accountabilities and responsibilities. The CEO said, "Over the last twenty years, we paid 311 million Birr [about 12 million USD] for local communities, local government and to Oromia regional state for their development works. However, there is no legal framework obliging us to do this. It is out of the owner's personal will and human nature" (personal communication, MIDROC CEO, March 19, 2019, Addis Ababa). On the contrary, the report from the MIDROC office shows that out of 311 million birr, only 89 million birr (USD 3.4 million) was spent on construction of a school, festivals and emergency food aid. By providing money to local government and local elders, the company has been trying to build up networks of patronage and fund rent-seeking strategies of local elites. When asked about the complaints from local communities and local government authorities about the company's neglect of local communities' health and livelihoods, the CEO replied, "the company was not established to address socioeconomic and health problems of the society. These are the duties and responsibilities of governments, particularly the regional government. We are obliged only to pay tax as per the agreement, which did not include any obligation on the side of the company to pay for the local communities". In this context, as a company working for profit, the CEO's argument seems reasonable, and hints at the mismanagement and governance problems at the federal and regional government levels. However, the company's negligence of environmental security and exclusion of local communities from job opportunities amount to environmental crime and failure to fulfill its social responsibilities respectively.

The contribution of extractive industries to local and national development depends on institutional arrangements and resource governance, which are highly influenced by the political and economic policies and on the patterns of state-society relations (Bebbington et al., 2018). In terms of institutional arrangement and approaches of resource governance, states and powerful non-state actors resort to putting

structures and policies in place or manage existing structures, networks and systems to enhance their control over resources. Auty (2006) further argues that the contribution of mining enclaves to local economies is contingent on national political ordering and how tax revenue is channeled down to the grassroots economy. Under corrupt and authoritarian systems, revenue from extractive industries is either not channeled to local development or used for patronage networks and silencing resistance. Evidence from the federal Ministry of Revenue also shows that none of the revenue collected from MIDROC over the last 20 years was channeled to Oromia regional state.

The company's reliance on the federal government has given it leverage to escape accountability for its environmental pollution and disobey local level administration. As Appel (2012) rightly underlines, disentanglement of extractive industries is often used as a strategy of evading responsibilities. Guji zone and Oddo Shakiso district administration officials claim that MIDROC authorities often ignore local administration including those in Oromia regional state. Meanwhile, MIDROC company representatives claimed that the company is directly answerable to the Federal Government's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum. The ministry, on the other hand, had neither the political will nor sense of commitment to address local peoples' questions. An interview with a top official in the ministry revealed that officials in the ministry did not supervise the company except by receiving reports and income tax from the company itself. As a result, despite reports from local communities about the negative impact of the mine on public health, the environment and local livelihoods, the ministry turned a deaf ear to these complaints for 20 years, allowing the company to operate without accountability. The ministry renewed the mine's license for another ten years in March 2018, sparking the massive public protest that forced it to suspend the license. Despite opposition from some experts within the ministry against renewal of the license on the basis that a proper impact assessment had not been conducted for 20 years, the then-Minister (an OPDO<sup>4</sup> member) and deputy minister (a TPLF member) unilaterally decided to renew the license without consulting Oromia regional state or local communities (personal communication with a director in the Ministry, April 2019). The renewal of the license thus appears to have been a political decision taken without proper assessment of the health and economic impacts of the mine.

## 5. Aspects of dispossession, exclusion and resistance

In this section, I analyze processes of dispossession and exclusion of local communities and how those processes eventually resulted in local resistance against the extractive company and the federal government of Ethiopia upon whose coercive power the company relied in strengthening its enclaved production. The duality of extractive industries—as enclaved production and as activities entangled within local and extra-local dynamics—make them complex terrains where competing actors contest and negotiate. In this paper, I have discussed that mining enclaves are often more linked to national and global markets than local economies. Many scholars succinctly argue that extractive industries often disconnect/disentangle themselves from the local societies as such disembeddedness enables them to exclude local people, and also serves as an opportunity to avoid social responsibilities (Appel 2012; Auty 2006; Lesutis 2019). Extractive projects' disconnection of themselves from local communities also entails inclusion and exclusion that privileges those included and disfavors those excluded in the process (Hall et al., 2011). For example, enclosure in pastoralist areas excludes pastoralists from accessing water, pasture, and other resources, but privileges private ranchers, agri-business investors or the state to access the

<sup>3</sup> The exchange rate of 1 USD to ETB ranges from 8.07 to 19.77 during the period of the report (July 30, 1998-July 30, 2014). I took an average of 1 USD = 13.74 ETB).

<sup>4</sup> OPDO (Oromo People's Democratic Organization) was one of the coalition parties forming the EPRDF, presumably representing the Oromo people, but in actuality serving as the TPLF's administrative channel in fulfilling its political and economic interests in Oromia.

resources unabated. In this regard, the practice of dispossession aimed at accumulating wealth including capital, labor and land, which Harvey (2003) describes as “*accumulation by dispossession*”, is often part of the broader capitalist economy. Likewise, by dispossessing local communities of their resources and their good health, and then also excluding them from the production of gold and the employment opportunities, MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine continued amassing the gold resource unabated for 20 years (Regassa 2016).

MIDROC’s exclusion of local communities can be described in different ways: First, it restricted local communities from accessing resources such as rocks (to extract gold), forest, water, and farmland within concession sites. Second, it excluded them from decision-making on matters that affect their life (the local people have never been consulted before, during and after the land was transferred to the company, and neither were they involved in decisions related to land appropriation for mineral exploration by the company). Third, it excluded local people from employment opportunities in the company. Fourth, the overall socioeconomic and environmental impacts of the company have resulted in further marginalization of the people.

The company’s privileged position and its exclusion of local communities began during unilateral land transfer without local consent. A resident of Dhibba Batte village in the vicinity of the MIDROC concession site narrates the process of land transfer as follows:

The land where MIDROC extracts gold was our ancestral land. My father lived and died on that land. The land that is now used for the company’s dumpsite was our agricultural field for maize and coffee. It was a fertile land in the valley. You can see some coffee trees still remaining but many hectares of coffee were bulldozed between 1998 and 2004 as the company was expanding its operation. Government officials at the zone and woreda levels told us that the land was given to the Sheik [Sheik Mohammad Al-amudi—the owner of MIDROC gold mine PLC], and we were not allowed to collect coffee beans from the site. The company security would shoot people if were they found closer to the concession sites. Neither the company nor the government paid us compensation (Anonymous informant, March 2019, Dhibba Batte).

The elder’s description of the transfer of the land to the company, the lack of consultation of landowners, and the violence subsequently visited upon local communities provides a glimpse of how Ethiopia’s political economy has historically been built through conquest and exploitation. Some scholars describe the exploitative system under successive regimes in Ethiopia as a dependent colonial economy for it relied on extracting natural and human resources from the peasantry without putting in place systems of redistributive justice (Hamesso and Hassen 2008; Holcomb and Ibsa 1990).

My informants from the locality repeatedly pointed out that MIDROC’s employment strategies are problematic in two aspects. While the first is related to limited job opportunities the company offers to local communities, the second is that the recruitment and employment strategies used for those limited jobs are problematic. MIDROC lacks a program that supports local community employment. Moreover, its recruitment of local community members is neither transparent nor perceived as fair by local communities. Former employees also complain that the company was discriminatory in its payment and recruitment procedures. They state that the company initially started recruiting local people as guards and day labourers through the strategy of “work for food.” The workers were only given meals for their service. There was no payment in cash. This continued for eight years until in 2009 a protest broke out and prompted the company to change its payment to salary. Such differentiation in recruitment approach, which Rubbers (2019b) calls occupational segmentation, allowed local level company managers to recruit unskilled workers without going through the company’s recruitment procedures, putting such workers at risk of being fired anytime without prior warning because they did not have formal

contracts. MIDROC’s discrimination in terms of recruitment is also related to lack of transparency in terms of vacancy announcement when it comes to local communities. According to informants that include local government authorities, vacancies were not often posted in Shakiso town. Rather, people were recruited in Addis Ababa and in some cases, vacancies were announced in Shakiso after the deadline. Some informants also pointed to differences in the amount of payment received by local employees versus employees from other areas for the same job position, similar qualification level, and experience.

One key informant describes the situation as follows:

MIDROC discriminates against local people during employment. Our children never get a proper job in the company. They employ our people only as guards and labourers. They finish all recruitment in Addis Ababa through a new company called Trust. This Trust company makes an announcement in Shakiso only after the deadline has already passed. There is no way to complain about such discrimination. Local government authorities were either unwilling or powerless in this regard (anonymous informant, Dhibba Batte, March 16, 2019).

Local government authorities and residents share the views that the company recruited employees from other places without advertising or posting vacancies to the local people. According to the report published by the company, the workforce of the company was 1272, of which 860 were permanent and 12 were expatriates working at various capacities. MIDROC Gold also employs 109 employees on secondment basis from Trust Protection and Personnel Services PLC. In fact, the report does not show how many are from the local people and how many are from other regions, but data obtained from the field shows that the company employed only 33 people from the local communities. Out of these employees from local people, twenty-two were guards, two were drivers, five were janitors and four were professional experts. This clearly shows that the company depends on the local society mainly for unskilled and low-paid labor force.

The other major area of complaint from local communities is related to Trust Protection and Personnel Services PLC, the company that was recruiting employees on behalf of MIDROC. The local government authorities and community members do not know about this company but MIDROC always refers recruitment issues to it. I later found out that Trust Protection and Personnel Services PLC is also part of MIDROC Group. MIDROC used ‘outsourcing’ of recruitment to the Trust company as strategy of escaping social responsibilities. An official in Shakiso district Social Affairs had the following to say:

Some eight years ago, before the death of Mr. Alemayehu Atomsa, the ex-Oromia president, I personally wrote a letter to MIDROC asking for clarification about Trust company. I also copied the letter to Mr. Alemayehu. I finally had a meeting with the president, where MIDROC CEO was also invited. We discussed issues of recruitment, transparency problems, exclusion of local people, and many more. Mr. Alemayehu gave good directions, but after his death, everything was turned upside down. A lady from Trust company gave me a call once. She warned me like a military. She directly warned me to stop asking anything about the company. I couldn’t get administrative support from Oromia side and stopped it in fear of retribution (Anonymous official, Shakiso, March 13, 2019).

In terms of contribution to the local economy, interviews and field observations show that the mining company remained an exclusionary enclave for the entire period of its operation. The mine is located in a geographically secluded area. The company employees live in a staff compound in the Shakiso town, located at about 5 km away from the mining site. Company workers rarely interacted with local communities in terms of buying local products. For example, the staffs do not buy livestock products from the community in suspicion of the safety of the livestock in the vicinity of the company as the area is environmentally

polluted with toxic waste from the mine. Local communities claim that the price of their cattle is half the price of the same size and quality animal in the market from other places only because of its location. Merchants downgrade the price saying, “it is from Shakiso and is not of the same quality as those coming from other places”. Overall, local residents have deep-rooted discontent about the company’s exclusionary practices. An elderly woman in Rejji village complains:

The company didn’t contribute anything to our people; but it became a source of misery. The company doesn’t employ our youth. Its officials say that our youth are not well educated. Even the guards are not allowed to enter to the center of the operation. They guard from outside the site (Anonymous informant, March 21, 2019, Rejji).

MIDROC’s enclave production and exclusionist employment strategies were also evidently clear in its discrimination against local guards compared to those employed from other areas. According to a former MIDROC employee who served as a guard for seven years, the company does not allow Guji guards to work in the inner sections of the company. Rather, guards from the Guji community were assigned to watch the outskirts of the concession sites. This resonates with the general idea of how mining enclaves are constructed through securitization of concession sites, which in the case of MIDROC Laga-Dambi mine constitutes securitizing the core mining site from local security guards as well. The informant specifically said, “We were employed to protect the company from our own fellow Guji men and women. They wanted us because we know the area, and also we are from the same community. In doing so, they created conflict within our community among clans, individuals, etc.” Ironically, the company uses social networks and knowledge of local communities in protecting itself but tries to disentangle itself from the society by creating boundaries between areas controlled by local guards and those controlled by the security personnel it recruits from outside the area and sees as more loyal to the company.

In terms of environmental impacts as well, MIDROC caused serious environmental pollution through toxic chemicals dumped into rivers that local communities use for themselves and their livestock. Empirical evidence from local communities in three villages/kebeles (lowest administrative unit) adjacent to the mining site, namely Dhibba Bate, Didola and Rejji shows that contamination of the rivers with toxic chemicals caused severe public health problems. According to a report from Ethiopian Public Health Institute, which has not been made public, over 150 cases of miscarriage, 384 cases of disabilities with 66 of them acute, and over 130 cases of stillbirth were recorded over a period of five years (2013–2018) among the communities in the three adjoining villages (EPHI 2019). During my fieldwork, I also made 36 house-to-house visits and observed 19 children with serious deformities and paralysis.

A 78 year-old local elder described the impacts of the MIDROC gold mine as follows:

Since the land was transferred to the company [MIDROC], we faced many problems: our cattle died after drinking water from the tailing dams, women lost pregnancy [miscarriage] and children have been disabled. When we complain to the company even about the death of our livestock after drinking polluted water in the waste dam or being drawn into it, the company people never listen to us (anonymous informant, Dhibba Bate, March 16, 2019).

Despite such negative environmental and public health impacts, the mining company remained unaccountable mainly, according to Shakiso District former Social Affairs Officer, because of “the company’s strong affiliation to higher political authorities at the federal level”. Thus, the economic, health, social and environmental impacts of the mining substantiate the argument that although mining operations are seemingly enclave spaces; they are also entangled with local contexts in terms of their impacts. Such impacts of extractive industries could have been avoided or at least minimized through proper environmental regulation and corporate social responsibility. This paper shows that rather than

contributing to the socioeconomic development of local communities, the presence of MIDROC in the area has worsened the people’s lives, particularly in terms of public and environmental health conditions. As a result, local communities resisted against the exploitative and exclusionary practices, as well as the disastrous human and environmental impacts of the mine.

### 5.1. Local resistance and reconfiguration of the mining frontier

Despite securitization of the concession site by the company and the government, popular resistance against the mining company’s disastrous practices erupted periodically. As Ethiopia’s macro-level political economy (or political settlement) became unsettled and conflict challenged the central government from 2014 (Weldegiorgis et al., 2017), MIDROC also became more vulnerable to protest. Resistance against MIDROC’s exclusionary practices and its environmental impacts echoes a broader argument about the entanglement of the power of domination and power of resistance. As Sharp et al. (2000) maintain, power of domination does not operate in isolation. Rather, it is entangled with the power of resistance and the interplay between the two forms of power (dominating and resisting power) reconfigures existing relations between actors, systems and practices. With regard to the reproduction of resistance in response to dominating power, Long (2001) argues that actors, including local communities, are not passive recipients of oppressive power. Actors utilize resources at their disposal (networks, agency and knowledge) in mobilizing resistance against dominating power.

Likewise, as enclaves are connected to macro and micro-political forces, competing interests between MIDROC and the federal government on the one hand, and local communities and local government authorities on the other hand, have made the mining operation a contested space. In the process of strengthening its disentanglement from local contexts, MIDROC consolidated its networks with the federal government and key politicians in the federal institutions. According to an interview with an expert in the Oromia Bureau of Mining, “MIDROC acted like an authoritarian government in disregarding rule of law and societal concerns. It lived with impunity due to its strong alignment to the ruling party and a few key political figures” (anonymous informant, Oromia Bureau of Mining, April 2019). On the other hand, the network (formal and informal) of local communities, activists, human rights organizations, media and scholars challenged the company’s exclusionary practices and environmental and public health impacts. Thus, perspectives on the territory, approaches to conducting mineral extraction, and issues of local communities’ resource rights remain contentious.

In 2009, in response to the death of over 360 cattle as a result of toxic chemicals from the mining site spillage into a river, the Guji Oromo in nearby districts protested against the company. Government security forces coercively responded to the popular protest, leading to an arrest of some 15 individuals who were leading the protest.<sup>5</sup> The federal government’s use of brute force against protesters can be analyzed from two interconnected dimensions. Firstly, as Das et al. (2004) argue, societies at the margin of the state are often violently subdued in the process of state consolidation of power in such areas. This resonates also with frontier expansion that is enacted as a political project of exerting state authority on people and territories. Secondly, as I discussed earlier in this paper, the government supports the company’s enclave production by suppressing local voices and resistance.

Soon after the protest, the company owner and higher government authorities from the federal and regional states arrived at the location of

<sup>5</sup> Oromia-Ethiopia: Wikileaks – Govt’s Crackdown on Oromo on Behalf of MIDROC Gold During Shakiso/Guji Protests of 2009 (<https://oromilandinfo.wordpress.com/2013/04/04/oromia-ethiopia-wikileaks-govts-crackdown-on-oromo-on-behalf-of-midroc-gold-during-shakisoguji-protests-of-2009/>) (accessed 21 July 2018).



the protest whereby the owner of the company pledged 15 million Birr (about 1 million US\$) in compensation for the impacts of the mine. Nevertheless, the company did not do anything practical to mitigate the problem of environmental pollution and its health impacts on local communities. My own observations of the area in 2018 and 2019 confirmed that the company has caused grave health and environmental impacts. It has been reported that the company managers were not responsive to complaints from both local communities and district authorities, arguing that the company was only accountable to the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum.

As part of the nationwide protest in Oromia regional state—one of the ten regional states of Ethiopia in the federal arrangement—there was, from 2014 onwards, a series of protests against the MIDROC gold mine. A report from BBC and other local media outlets in December 2017 about children's disabilities and pregnant women in the area associated with toxic chemicals went viral on social media and provoked social unrest and strikes. With the shocking media report about the deadly impact of the mine, the company's negative entanglement with local socioeconomic and environmental conditions was exposed, provoking popular protests and strikes in Guji zone.<sup>6</sup> To make matters worse, in April 2018 the federal government announced the renewal of the company's license for another ten years amidst such widespread media reports about its impacts. The strike evolved into a popular movement leading to the killing of twelve protesters by government security personnel in May 2018. Nevertheless, local reaction and a network of local communities, scholars, human rights organizations, and local government authorities reversed the balance of power and forced the Ministry of Mining to suspend the mining operation. On the 8th of May 2018, the Ministry issued a statement suspending MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine's license until an independent team of researchers could conduct a scientific investigation and produce convincing recommendations. The federal government commissioned researchers seemingly to legitimize its claim that the extractive industry does not have any negative environmental or health impacts. On the contrary, a draft research conducted on health, environmental and socioeconomic impacts of the mine, confidentially showed to the researcher, shows an alarming correlation between the mine and associated public and environmental health problems in the area. However, the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum refused to publicize the reports.

In the struggle for the people's right to environmental health and human security, social media and civil society organizations played a fundamental advocacy role. While social media activists used the platform to ignite social resistance against the government's re-opening plans by posting graphic pictures of disabled children, civil society organizations (local and international) brought the issue to the attention of the UN Human Rights Committee. Information provided by the civil society organizations led the Human Rights Committee to include the issue of Laga-Dambi in its 2020 List of Issues for its upcoming review of Ethiopia, requesting from the government of Ethiopia a detailed explanation about the health, environmental and livelihood conditions of people residing adjacent to the mining site.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum announced, in February 2021, its decision to allow MIDROC to reopen the mine—a decision that reverses the government's initial promise that it would not allow the mine to reopen until scientific evidence is brought and appropriate measures are put in place. This hints at continuity of top-down decision-making practices informed by the nature of Ethiopia's macro-political economy across regimes. The re-opening of the mine also shows how the economic interests of the state and private companies converge in resource frontiers, exacerbating the marginalization and exclusion of local communities

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/africa/mining-firms-license-renewal-fuels-protests-ethiopia>

<sup>7</sup> [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fETH%2fQ%2f2&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2fC%2fETH%2fQ%2f2&Lang=en)

from resources important for their livelihoods.

## 6. Conclusion

The dynamics in Ethiopia's resource (mining) frontier have been produced and reproduced through continuous contestations, negotiations and conflict between micro and macro political and economic discourses and practices. With the temporary closure of MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine and the internationalization of the case through civil society organizations, the mining frontier has become a highly contested terrain. The area is no longer an enclaved space, but a practically engaged, contested and negotiated territory where power relations are contingent on local and national political dynamics.

In the case of MIDROC's gold mine, an enclave was produced through the company's exclusionary practices and reinforced by the federal government's exercise of coercive power against local resistance. The company's exclusion of local communities, the disconnection of mine employees from local markets, and the direct connection of the mine to the global market manifest features of enclave production. On the other hand, despite the company's efforts in disentangling itself from local communities, its reliance on local guards, indigenous leaders and local government authorities in securitizing the concession site echoes broader arguments about the entanglement of extractive projects in local political and economic situations. Moreover, negative impacts of the mine (health, economic and environmental), dependence of the mine on local communities for unskilled labor including guards for its outlying areas, and conflicts in relation to people's claims to resource rights demonstrate how mining industries are entangled in local social, economic and political situations.

The micro-level violent mining practices in the Laga-Dambi Gold Mine were not isolated cases, but part of Ethiopia's history of exploitation in its resource frontiers. Successive regimes in the country used control over territories and people as technologies of power consolidation. From the imperial period all through the rule of the military, EPRDF and now the Prosperity Party under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's pastoralist and agropastoral regions continue to be milked and exploited yet remain marginal to infrastructural and economic improvements. The dominant imagination and depiction of these spaces merely as places of economic bounty that should be made eligible for extraction nullifies local communities' customary resource rights. Likewise, Guji Oromos' loss of their farmland and artisanal mining areas through the process of transferring the land first to the state-owned Adola Gold Mining Enterprise and later to the private MIDROC Laga-Dambi Gold Mine highlights the continuity of state-induced violent resource appropriation. The company's environmental pollution and its deadly health impacts, the absence of legal frameworks addressing community benefits and corporate social responsibility, and MIDROC's unchecked exercise of power reflect the complex party-dominated political economy of Ethiopia over the last three decades.

Nevertheless, frontier imaginations and discursive representations shaping interactions and practices in such spaces are not static. Entanglement between local and extra-local ideas, processes and actors reconfigured Ethiopia's Laga-Dambi mining frontier, making it a politically salient, contested space. The vulnerability of MIDROC to protests following the macro-level political crisis shows how its enclave was embedded in the wider political order and dependent on the stability of that order for production of the enclave. While the suspension of MIDROC's mining license in response to popular protest shows that mining frontiers are not only spaces of power consolidation but also resistance, the announcement of the reopening of the mine without meeting any of the communities' demands signals a continuation of violent extraction.

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