

THE TRUE PRICE OF GOLD

On their quest for gold, multinational corporations are ransacking the north of Tanzania. Local people are losing their land. Many of them are left with no other option but to risk their lives picking gold-bearing rock out of the mine spoil. But some of the smallholders are going back to farming – a way out with an uncertain outcome.

By Klaus Sieg

The wall is omnipresent. Mary Mugesesi Chacha just has to take a look out of her hut. The concrete slabs are gleaming in the brilliant sunshine. They are protected by glittering barbed wire that two tall fences stand in front of. On a broad pathway between the two fences, patrol cars belonging to the police and the private security firm do their rounds. Behind the wall, a water cannon is standing on one of the spoil tips the size of a tower block reaching skywards. “That’s where our cattle and goats used to graze,” remarks the forty-year-old, knitting her brows glumly. The spoil tips come from the North Mara Gold Mine, operated by the multinational Acacia Mining corporation, a subsidiary of Canada’s Barrick Gold, the largest gold producers in the world. The company only had the walls and fences erected a few months ago, to keep so-called intruders from climbing up the spoil tips and

looking for gold-bearing rocks. The mine operators regard the tips as their property, which they seek to further exploit.

People have been shot at here in northern Tanzania. There have been deaths and injuries. Women have been abused and raped. The village of Nyakunguru, where Mary Mugesesi Chacha lives with her husband and seven children, has also suffered deaths. Young men show scars on their heads and bodies that they have sustained on the tips.

Looking for the gold mine’s breadcrumbs is not only dangerous because of the attacks by the security forces. People can slip, fall or have heavy rocks fall on them. Moreover, competition is harsh among these desperados and adventurers. Violence, applied with fists, stones and rocks, is part of everyday life.

This doesn’t put off anyone. Again and again, people climb up the tips, usually holding a yellow jerrycan full of water. They pour the water onto the stones, and if any of them contain gold, this can be spotted by the way they shine. Quite a few people come to Tanzania’s remote North from other parts of the country or even neighbouring Kenya to engage in this activity.

HUNGER AND POVERTY ARE DRIVING THE PEOPLE TO THE MINES

Mary Mugesesi Chacha was also among the so-called intruders. She doesn’t really look like an especially brave woman. She carefully chooses her words, eyeing the surroundings with uncertainty. “I was always very frightened, climbed up the tip with hands shaking near-



Mary Mugesesi Chacha and her husband working in a maize field in Nyakunguru, Tarime District, Tanzania. Behind them is the wide expanse of the Acacia Gold Mine site.

ly every day. and I slept badly at night,” she recalls. Nevertheless, she risked going there again and again, just like her husband, sitting next to her and nodding. “What else could we have done? It was the only way to feed our children, she remarks, explaining that the yield from the family’s small field was simply too poor. “I was often dazed, felt weak from hunger and kept on thinking about how I could earn some money to buy food.”

Gold has already been extracted on a large scale in northern Tanzania for more than 100 years. Following the German colonial empire’s discovery of this precious metal on the shores of Lake Victoria, it opened the first large mine in 1909. Under British rule, the German Empire having lost all its colonies after suffering defeat in the First World War, mining experienced a veritable boom up to the Second World War.

Gold production in northern Tanzania dwindled to insignificance in post-war years. It was not before the 1970s, when prices had again begun to rise, that mining was pursued anew. Then, towards the turn of the millennium, international mining corporations started to take an interest in the region and began to drastically expand extraction. The South African company Anglo Gold Ashanti has its largest open-cast mine in the District of Geita, while Acacia Mining operates three mines in all in the country.

VIOLENT CONFLICTS, POISONED WATER, HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

During the last 15 years, an annual average of well over 40 tonnes has been extracted from the ground in Tanzania. This East African country is now Africa’s fourth-largest producer. Gold is Tanzania’s second most important source of foreign currency, right next to tourism, whose most important destination is in the immediate neighbourhood of the gold mines – Serengeti National Park. The North-Mara Gold Mine, situated a mere two hours away from Serengeti by car, was opened in 2002. It was taken over by Barrick Gold in 2006.

Trouble soon started. In 2008, 200 people from the surrounding villages raided the site and destroyed plant worth 15 million US dollars. A year later, a member of parliament demanded the closure of the mine because 18 people had died in one of the villages through drinking contaminated water. Stricter environmental standards were imposed. The operators renewed the 40,000 square-metre basin for mine wastewater, although they said the

measure had been necessary because of vandalism. People still complain of contaminated water today.

The violent conflict between the mine and the so-called intruders and the operators of small mines has also been going on for a number of years. The local population had traditionally mined for gold on part of the Acacia Mining site themselves before they were driven off.

In 2013, some of the victims of the violence brought a suit against Acacia Mining before the High Court in London/UK. The corporation denied the allegations, and in 2015, an out-of-court settlement for indemnity was agreed with the plaintiffs. Details of the agreement are subject to a secrecy clause.

Furthermore, a complaints office for human rights violations was established. However, not only the non-governmental organisation MiningWatch Canada, which has been critically monitoring the impacts of Acacia Mining’s operations on the local population for some years, has its doubts whether this office, which is completely dependent on the mining corporation, will be of any help to the victims.

GOLD MINING INVOLVES A HUGE AREA CONSUMPTION, WHICH LEADS TO CONFLICTS OVER LAND

Visitors may take a look around the mine if they have registered for a tour group. In order to get to the other side of the light walls, they have to endure time-consuming security checks. Before they are taken across the site in grill-windowed vehicles, they are all required to hand in their smartphones. Photos of the craters the size of small towns, in which giant excavators, dumper trucks and crushers are rumbling away, don’t seem to be desired.

“Since the wall was built, we haven’t had any further problems with the intruders,” says a woman from Acacia Mining’s communication team before veering off to another topic. She prefers to lecture on the mine’s social projects in a Power Point presentation. For some years, Acacia Mining has been building schools and health centres to calm the sentiments of the locals.

To the people in the villages, the wall is a further slap in the face. Although the mines hold the land use contracts that they have signed with the government, the surrounding communities have used this land for generations.



“The people in the villages are still waiting for the compensation and infrastructure measures that they have been promised,” says the head of a non-governmental organisation that would prefer not to be named. She says that much remains undealt with among those in power locally, and notes that the mine is attracting labour and adventurers. “This in turn leads to an increase in alcohol consumption, violence and prostitution,” she adds, claiming that anger is building up in the region.

“Theoretically, I’m not even allowed to leave our hut,” explains Mary Mugesu Chacha, smiling bitterly and pointing to a white-painted rock in front of her modest home. It marks the border of the North Mara Mine site, which can be extended to where she lives at any time.

The mine is relentlessly eating its way into the countryside. “We can hear the detonations that they loosen the rock with almost daily,” says Mary Mugesu Chacha. The rock, mined both open-cast and underground, is crushed and ground into a fine dust. Afterwards, the gold is leached out with poisonous chemicals, usually with cyanide. Yield is shockingly low.



Around 4,000 mine gold ore down the shafts of the small gold mines in Mgsusu, Geita, Tanzania. They crush the ore into powder and rinse out the gold using mercury. Wastewater is then released uncontrolled into the environment.

Photos: Jörg Bötling

But this has changed. Bananas are on the menu alongside maize, various vegetables, rice, and sometimes even meat. How could Mary Mugesi Chacha manage this?

AGRICULTURE AS A WAY OUT

Mary Mugesi Chacha has once again started farming, together with a group of former intruders. They have cultivated a patch of land and are growing rice, using improved seed and applying sustainable methods. Rice will soon follow. Yield provides enough for the families, and additionally, they can sell the surplus on the local market. “None of us now need to risk their lives on the spoil tips,” Mary Mugesi Chacha says with pride in her eyes.

This was all possible because she and her comrades-in-arms were able to obtain advice from another group in the village who had already formed a cooperative five years before. They had been supported by a partner organisation of Germany’s Brot für die Welt.

Just a few grams of gold are obtained out of a whole ton of rock – barely enough for a pair of wedding rings. Thus gold mining is consuming huge areas and contaminating the environment. People are above all anxious about the mine’s huge wastewater basin. Some of the region’s villages are located right at the foot of the house-tall dam that the poisoned water is lapping against.

That these fears aren’t based on fantasy was demonstrated once again early this year by an iron ore mine wastewater basin dam bursting in Brazil’s Brumadinho region. The sludge from the mine, owned by the Brazilian Vale corporation, buried hundreds of people.

EXTRACTING GOLD ON A SMALL SCALE – A DANGEROUS VENTURE

But it is not only the big mines that are responsible for the much-cited curse of gold in the North of Tanzania. In the surrounding villages, gold is extracted on a small scale. Mary Mugesi Chacha regularly hears the clumping of heavy boots worn by men passing her hut and carrying shovels and pick-axes. These

men hack and dig in areas that are outside the big mines or are not yet being used by Acacia Mining. Not properly propped or supported, these small mines can quickly turn into graves.

Small washing and screening plants can be seen all over the village. Even a little crushing machine stands between the huts, rattling away incessantly, and noisy enough for Mary Mugesi Chacha to hear even from her hut.

Gold extraction on a small scale involves leaching the gold out of the fine sludge with mercury. This is usually dealt with by women almost always using their bare hands, and it was also the way that Mary Mugesi Chacha earned her money if she did not directly sell the rocks containing gold at a low price to a trader because she urgently needed something to eat for herself and her family. Mercury vapour is extremely harmful to health. “I haven’t got any health complaints yet, and I hope it stays that way,” she says, looking at her children who have gathered around the table in the family’s simple hut and are waiting for their dinner. “This used to be a difficult moment for me because I couldn’t put enough on the table for them,” she recalls.

Together with others in the group, Mary Mugesi Chacha and her husband hoe the weeds out between the maize plants in their common field. From here too, the wall made of light-coloured concrete and the spoil tips of the big mines are visible. During the night, the giant site is plunged into daylight with searchlights. It then looks like another planet, with an airfield and its own radio masts, a network of roads and dwellings for foreign skilled labour. Here too, rocks painted white mark the edge of the mining site. They are placed way ahead of the concrete wall armed with barbed wire. The field cultivated by Mary Mugesi Chacha’s group lies within this land belonging to the mine. How long will the smallholders still be able to use it? “That isn’t clear, but we will find another piece of land once things are over here,” she explains. Mary Mugesi Chacha is optimistic despite the precarious situation she and her group are in – possibly because she has already had to endure so much more in her life.

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