

The story of Zimbabwe's Marange diamonds: Pollution, Politics, Power



The inhabitants of Marange believe their village would be a better place to live in had it not been for the discovery of enormous deposits of alluvial diamonds in 2006, believed to constitute approximately 25% of the world's known deposits.

The Marange diamond story has been one sad episode after another and the trend continues. The first

major challenge was the unannounced invasion of Marange by tens of thousands of artisanal miners, merchants and dealers who did not submit to the local traditional leaders, culture and lifestyle. The diamond rush was soon followed by reports of widespread violence among the panners and the dealers. Rape, murder and armed robberies became the order of the day, as they violently dispossessed each other of the precious stones and anything of monetary value. The level of lawlessness and violence brought by the diamond rush had never been experienced before in Marange.

November 2008 added another twist to the unfolding drama in Marange when the Zimbabwe National Army was deployed to drive out the artisanal miners and dealers as the state moved in to take full control of the lucrative diamond fields. There was a massacre of artisanal miners and villagers and hundreds of villagers fled their traditional homes to take refuge in cities. Over 200 miners were gunned down within a spate of 5 weeks and the exact figure of those killed will never be known. Traditional leaders were helpless as their authority was overridden by the state.

Having secured the diamond fields government moved a gear up in 2009 when it announced that it was going to forcibly relocate over 4 000 families from Marange to Arda Transau, a government farm located about 40KM north of Marange.

Whilst decent houses have been constructed for some of the relocated families, concern has been raised over the lack of adequate land for cultivation and pastures, given that the relocated families are subsistence farmers. Currently the families have been allocated plots measuring the size of a football pitch where they both live and cultivate crops for subsistence. Over 2000 people have so far been relocated to Arda Transau and over 25 000 thousand await their fate.

In 2009 it was estimated that diamond fields stretch for 70 000 hectares. However the area believed to be rich in diamond deposits has now exceeded 120 000 hectares and more explorations are still taking place, suggesting that more villagers will be earmarked for relocation to pave way for diamond mining.

However, apart from worrying about an uncertain future, remaining Marange residents are now more concerned about their health amidst increasing pollution of the environment by the diamond mining companies.

Water Pollution

Save or Sabi River used to be the source of life for several villages starting from Marange and stretching several kilometers downstream. The river provided fish, drinking water for both humans and livestock and domestic chores such as laundry. Villagers also bathed in the Save river which also acted as one of the few recreational facilities for young boys and girls who flocked the mighty river for swimming escapades. In some parts food was also grown alongside the river, more so due to the fact that Marange is a semi-arid region which experiences perennial droughts. Renowned and highly successful Irrigation schemes at Nyanyadzi and Birchnough Bridge also drew water from the Save River.

However, since the commencement of commercial diamond mining activities in Marange in September 2009, villagers have watched in agony as life is rapidly being squeezed out of this once Might River by mining

villagers have watched in agony as life is rapidly being squeezed out of this once Might River by mining companies. A scientific study commissioned by the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association and carried out by The University of Zimbabwe confirmed the fears of villagers and nongovernmental organizations who have long suspected that companies were polluting Save River. The report concluded that the water in Save River is heavily contaminated 'to such an extent that communities cannot use the water for drinking purposes anymore whilst coming into contact with the water and mud cause an itching of the skin'. The report also noted that water in Save River was turbid or muddy due to discharge from the Anjin plant, thereby making it unsuitable for domestic consumption. The researchers also concluded that Villagers could develop cancer due to a heavy presence of chromium and nickel in the river.

Villagers interviewed by Center for Natural Resource Governance said they are now digging in the sand to fetch water for laundry as the water in the river is too muddy. Several boreholes have dried up in recent years with locals pointing accusing fingers to diamond mining companies whose activities, they suspect, have affected the water table. Their argument is supported by Prof. N.C Saxena of the Center of Mining Environment in India who observed that 'mining either by opencast or by underground methods damages the water regime and thus causes a reduction in the overall availability of water in and around the mining areas', adding that 'in the sedimentary deposit mining areas the water table and aquifers are damaged and thus the availability of water from these sources reduces'. Given that all the companies are into alluvial diamond mining using the open cast system, there is massive clearance of forests and the top soil in Marange, thereby affected both the water table and the quality of water. The clearance of land and forests in preference to diamond mining also means loss of wildlife habitat.

Air and Noise Pollution

Apart from water pollution, Marange is also experiencing serious air pollution. Villagers told CNRG how caterpillar motor graders are raising dust as they regularly grade the road surfaces which need regular maintenance due to the weight of dumpers. Villagers fear a rise in cases of diseases such as Tuberculosis due to dust inhalation. During the visit to Marange by the KP representatives in Zimbabwe in March 2012, this writer observed there were families living inside the premises of diamond mining companies. We saw huge earth movers making their way through homesteads, raising clouds of dust and impairing our vision momentarily.

Marange has also experienced noise pollution. At least four companies in Marange have been certified by the Kimberly Process Certification scheme whilst a few more are doing exploration in preparation for active mining. The combined effects of the mining activities of these companies have resulted in noise pollution to villagers near the diamond fields. The use of heavy trucks and equipment during the mining and processing of diamonds has transformed the once serene Marange into a heavy industrial site unsuitable for human habitation. Anjin Investments, by far the biggest mine in Marange, operates for 24 hours a day with its trucks and heavy machinery roaring throughout the night.

The noise also causes distress to wildlife in addition to loss of the natural habitat which has been their preferred territory since time immemorial. No plans were put in place to transfer wildlife from the mining concessions to areas that are wildlife friendly, let alone to study the area and identify animal species found there. Today there is no sign of wildlife in the area measuring over 120 000 hectares and no one dares to inquire what has happened to animal life in Marange. Wildlife could also succumb to the poisonous water in Save River where fish is now a rare species.

Reporting and writing about the true story of Marange is one of the most difficult jobs in Zimbabwe. The author of this article was arrested in 2010 and charged for publishing falsehoods that were deemed to be prejudicial to the economic interests of Zimbabwe after researching and documenting horrific human rights abuses committed by the army in Marange since 2008. He is constantly under surveillance by state security agents. Several journalists have been arrested in the course of their work of researching and informing the public about the goings on in Marange. Several journalists have been arrested and detained in the course of doing their legitimate work in Marange

Politicization of Diamonds: How villagers lost their voice

Others argue that the unfortunate events unfolding in Marange are a mirror of the political turmoil and collapse of governance systems in Zimbabwe which can be traced back to 2000 when President Mugabe's ZANU PF turned to land grab and other self destructive policies for political survival. Politics has dominated everything happening in Marange since the discovery of diamonds in 2006. Three of the four companies mining diamonds in Marange are joint ventures between some private companies and the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation (ZMDC)

joint ventures between some private companies and the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation (ZMDC) whilst the fourth, Marange Resources, is wholly owned by the Zimbabwe government through ZMDC. The companies were awarded special grants by President Mugabe to shield them from normal tender procedures and scrutiny. None of the four diamond mining companies has any prior history in diamond mining elsewhere in the world.

At one point the diamond fields were heavily guarded by several hundred soldiers and police who committed all types of human rights abuses, thereby creating an aura of terror in the surrounding communities.

After securing the diamond fields in 2009, government announced that families living inside and near the diamond fields would be relocated. Several meetings had been held between government officials and the villagers but all this came to nothing, with villagers demanding compensation before relocation. However, in December 2010 government abandoned negotiations and turned to state security agents in order to force Marange villagers to relocate to Arda Transau, about 40KM north of Marange. The forced relocation exercise was well timed.

In December 2010 ZANU PF held its 11th National People's Conference in Mutare and seized the opportunity to break the resistance of the villagers. A group of state security agents and ZANU PF officials descended on Marange and threatened villagers with unspecified action if they did not comply with the order to relocate. This brought back memories of November 2008 when members of the Zimbabwe National Army gunned down over 200 artisanal miners and villagers as government moved in to take control of the lucrative diamond fields.

Villagers were given a few hours to load their belongings and livestock onto waiting trucks. Their homesteads were razed to the ground by bulldozers as they watched helplessly before being taken to their new homes at Arda Transau. After the December 2010 forced relocations and home demolitions, few dared resist orders to vacate their premises. Diamond mining was politicized such that the rights of villagers were violated with impunity.

Homes were destroyed without any valuation, making it difficult for the villagers to claim reasonable compensations in the future. No agreements were signed between the relocated families and the mining companies or government regarding compensation. The exercise was overseen and implemented by the office of the Resident Minister and Provincial Governor of Manicaland, Chris Mushohwe, who was also the ZANU PF losing candidate for Mutare West in the 2008 harmonized elections.

Politics also reared its ugly head during the launch of the Zimunya Marange Community Share Ownership Trust by President Mugabe in July 2012. Political analysts suspect the community share ownership trusts, a product of the controversial economic empowerment and indigenization law, are being used by ZANU PF to woo voters ahead of a general election expected in 2013. The launch of the Zimunya Marange community share trust was marred by controversy as the Member of Parliament for the constituency Hon Shua Mudiwa was not invited to the event, which looked more like a ZANU PF political rally.

Militarization of Marange Diamonds

There has been growing concern about the increased involvement of the Zimbabwe National Army in diamond mining activities. Finance Minister Tendai Biti revealed at a conference hosted by Center for Natural Resource Governance in May 2012 that Anjin Investments was in partnership with the Zimbabwe National Army and not with the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation (ZMDC) as is the case with other joint ventures in Marange. ZMDC was formed by an Act of parliament to oversee the development of mining in Zimbabwe. The Anjin – ZNA relations came to light through a \$98 million loan extended by China to Zimbabwe for the construction of a Defense Academy. The loan was to be repaid with diamonds mined at Anjin.

Two reports released by the UK based NGO Global Witness revealed that several current and retired military and other security personnel were board members and shareholders in all the companies mining diamonds in Marange. Commenting on Anjin the report concluded that 'half of a large diamond mining company is likely part-owned and part-controlled by the Zimbabwean Ministry of Defense, military and police.' Global Witness also noted that a senior lawyer in the Zimbabwe National Army held 50% of shares in Anjin whilst the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Defense was also a member of Anjin's executive board. The report concluded that diamonds from Marange could be funding a parallel government, thereby undermining democracy and the work of the Inclusive Government in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe National Army officers have been guarding the diamond mines since November 2008 and are greatly feared by the local community due to the horrific abuses they committed since their entry into Marange. Although the scale and intensity of violence has gone down significantly, isolated cases of human rights abuses by the army

continue to be reported by the locals.

Artisanal Mining

The army and fellow state security agents have been involved in illegal digging with artisanal miners whom they charge 'protection fees' in the form of both money and diamonds. The unregulated artisanal diamond mining activities have contributed to deforestation, land degradation and water pollution. Artisanal miners dig randomly, usually operating under the cover of darkness at night and leave behind large open pits which are contributing to soil erosion and river siltation. Early in the morning artisanal miners and their military 'escorts' take their diamond rich alluvial soil to a nearby dam where they select gems. This is also contributing to the depreciation of water quality in Marange as the water in the dam is now muddy and unfit for domestic use.

Artisanal diamond mining is criminalized in Zimbabwe. The country lost the opportunity to regulate artisanal diamond mining when it backtracked on the Swakopmund agreement it reached with the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme in Namibia in November 2009. The Joint Work Plan, also known as the Swakopmund Agreement that was developed by Zimbabwe and the KPCS stipulated that Zimbabwe would create a legal framework for artisanal miners to operate legally in Marange and sell their diamonds to government.

If implemented, the Joint Work Plan had several advantages for Zimbabwe. First it would ensure that artisanal miners were protected by the law whilst also contributing to the economic growth of Zimbabwe. Further, it would ensure that the 'blood diamonds' tag on Marange diamonds would be exorcised since artisanal miners would be mining in a violence free environment. The agreement would also benefit the environment since government was going to regulate and monitor the activities of artisanal miners. In other words artisanal miners would be held to account for their actions. Failure by government to implement the Joint Work plan has ensured that illicit digging continues at a great cost to the environment and to the nation.

Conflict and Environmental Degradation

The impacts of conflict are usually measured in terms of body count, number of refugees and casualties. Little is said about the impacts of conflict on the environment and how environmental degradation will affect human life. Nevertheless, the negative impacts of conflict on the environment will in the long run impact the body count as more people will succumb to the effects of pollution. This is true in the case of Marange where the various forms of conflict are undermining the capacity of the environment to sustain life.

The combined effects of bad politics and militarization of Marange makes environmental management impossible. Some of the mining companies in Marange, armed with the special grant issued by the President, defied local environmental laws by starting mining before environmental impact assessments were carried out. The Environmental Management Agency (EMA) admitted that it has no powers to arrest perpetrators of environmental crimes. Director General of EMA, Mutsa Chasi told the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Mines in February 2012 that there is need to amend the Environmental Management Agency Act to establish an environmental crimes court, arguing that the formal judicial system has a limited appreciation of gravity of environmental crimes.

But the major challenge facing EMA is political. EMA is crippled when it comes to dealing with companies aligned to political heavyweights, more so companies granted special grants by the President. Bringing perpetrators of environmental crimes in Marange to justice will set EMA on collision course with ZANU PF.

The other challenge with EMA is how it uses the fines collected from environmental crime perpetrators. EMA is the beneficiary of the fines yet communities are the victims of the environmental crimes. There appear to be no correlation between the environmental crimes for which fines are charged and the end use of the fines collected. Fines must help communities mitigate the effects of pollution.

Even if the fines are paid directly to the affected communities, they are too paltry to deter companies from polluting. Grandwell Holdings, a subsidiary of the South African scrap metal company Reclam, owns 50% shares in Mbada diamonds. In its annual report of 2011 Grandwell holdings reported that in Marange it is better and cheaper to pay environmental fines than to avoid pollution. The company argued: "Fees are assessed for exceeding agreed limits on emissions and effluents.

Cheaper to pollute and pay a fine

Currently these fees are generally small in relation to the cost of environmental protection equipment and it is generally less expensive to pay the fees than to install anti-pollution devices. Further, the applicable laws do not generally require clean-up of environmental pollutants, and when clean-up is required, the applicable laws provide

generally require clean-up of environmental pollutants, and when clean-up is required, the applicable laws provide no guidance as to the extent to which the clean-up must be carried out."

Early 2012 Anjin was fined \$14 000 by EMA for causing water pollution in Marange and ordered to rehabilitate the affected area. However a \$14 000 fine is too insignificant for a company dealing in billions of dollars annually, making it cheaper to pollute and pay a fine than to prevent pollution, as argued by Grandwell.

Marange is a restricted area and those entering the area should obtain Police clearance. The parliamentary portfolio committee on mines and energy was denied entry to Marange a record three times. At one time even Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai was also denied access to Marange. Some trespassers have met the most severe forms of punishments which include murder, torture and rape.

Whilst restricting movement in Marange is understandable due to the ease with which alluvial diamonds can be extracted, the restriction has served to cover up many unpleasant things unfolding in Marange such as pollution and human rights abuses. The parliamentary portfolio committees on mines and energy and the environment must demand that they play their legitimate role of ensuring that mining activities in Marange comply with domestic laws and do not jeopardize the lives of villagers.

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