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## New Extractivism in Ghana's Salt Sector

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### Abstract

Since commercial production of oil and gas started in Ghana over a decade ago, the salt sector which has historically been dominated by artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has seen renewed corporate interest. Aided by the state's preference for large-scale mining (LSM) over ASM since the days of the Economic Reform Program, several tens of thousands of acres of areas previously operated by artisanal and small-scale miners for salt mining have been leased to large-scale salt mining companies. Situated in political settlement and infrapolitics theoretical frameworks, with a focus on two key salt producing sites (Songor and Keta lagoons) and using qualitative research methods through ethnographic engagement with affected regions, the study explores the consequences of this new extractivism in the salt sector to assess the long-term consequences of forced evictions, as well as role of civil society in the retention or otherwise of the now dominant LSM in the salt sector.

### Keywords

**Extractivism; Salt; Ghana; Songor; Keta; Mining**

## Introduction

In November 2020, as Ghana was preparing for nationwide general elections amidst a brutal covid-19 global pandemic, the Government of Ghana took an unprecedented decision to grant three restricted salt mining leases covering about 40,000 acres of land and lagoon surface area in and around the Songor Lagoon Basin to Electrochem Ghana Limited. This decision marked a new wave of corporate extractivism at the Songor Lagoon Basin which has the largest salt mining potential in West Africa and mirrors similar developments at the same site in the 1970s and 1980s when leases were granted to Vacuum Salt Limited and Star Chemicals Industries Limited. Related to the grant of these leases was the decision of the government to fully divest itself out of the former Songor Salt Project, a public entity which was created in early 1990s to take over operations of large-scale salt production firms whose licenses were cancelled due to persistent mining-induced violent resistance and conflicts that characterized their operations ([Langdon & Larweh 2017](#)).

The new wave of corporate extractivism at Songor Lagoon Basin parallels developments at the eastern parts of nearby Keta Lagoon Basin where restricted mining leases covering over 20,000 acres of parts of lagoon surface area and adjoining communities were granted to three large-scale salt producing companies between 2010 and 2014. Seven Seas Limited (one of the companies that received three of these leases), like Electrochem Ghana Limited, acquired parts of its concession from West African Goldfields Limited which had leased out portions of the same concession to about 50 small-scale salt producers ([Atta-Quayson & Baidoo 2020](#)). Both the Songor Lagoon Basin and Keta Lagoon Basin are public commons that have historically supported various livelihoods activities of people living in and around the basins that include fishing, salt winning, farming, game snaring, collection of snails, and gathering of firewood among others largely for personal consumption with the remainder traded for income. Consequently, the grant of large-scale salt mining licenses almost always triggers bitter and violent resistance and contestation.

At Songor Lagoon Basin, the grant of leases in the 1970s and 1980s by traditional authorities and later the government resulted in prolonged and often violent resistance by the indigenes or local people who felt that those leases represented an encroachment on their traditional autonomous production systems, an onslaught on their access to the public commons and dispossession of their lands. The feeling at the Keta Lagoon Basin has not been different following the grant of leases except that more lives have been lost and properties (in terms of value) there than was the case at Songor ([Atta-Quayson & Baidoo 2020](#); [Langdon & Larweh 2017](#)). Further, the environmental consequences of salt extractivism have come to the fore with the earlier resort to underground brine rather than sea brine by one of the operators at Keta Lagoon Basin (Seven Seas Limited) severely impacting water resources and livelihoods. The Songor Lagoon Basin doubles as an important biodiversity site and is a wetland site of importance designated under the Ramsar Convention, which raises further concerns about ecological impacts.

The grant of leases to large-scale salt producers covering sites where artisanal and small-scale salt producers previously operated reflects a growing state preference for large-scale salt mining following the discovery and production of oil and gas in commercial quantities in Ghana since 2010. This posturing is a continuation of a colonial and post-colonial development trajectory in Ghana characterized by a long history of extractivist production anchored in extraction of solid minerals (gold, bauxite, manganese and diamond), agriculture (cocoa and timber) and in recent times oil and gas ([Childs and Hearn 2016](#); [Aryeetey and Ackah 2018](#); [Torvikey 2021](#)). Unlike in the established traditional mineral sector (gold, bauxite, manganese and diamond) where the state's claim to ownership of the minerals (which influences the growing preference for large-scale operations) is not contested, the situation in the salt sector has been different. There are some communities that contest the state's inclusion of salt in 'minerals that occur in their raw state' and therefore nationalized by the Constitution citing how solar salt is produced<sup>1</sup>. Further, and most importantly, the mining law recognizes and

<sup>1</sup> Solar salt production starts with brine that may be obtained from the sea, kept in a pond created by salt producer for evaporation. Highly concentrated brine is later transferred to salination ponds where salt crystals are produced.

legalizes traditional artisanal salt mining by indigenes who expect the state to protect those activities rather than leasing out the very sites where these activities take place to large-scale operators.

Management of ensuing contention between the large-scale salt producers and the government (which historically backs the producers) on the one side and indigenous artisanal and small-scale producers, civil society organizations as well as residents of affected communities on the other hand differ from what transpire in the traditional minerals sector and evolved over the period. For example, in the traditional minerals sector, payment of compensation to land owners and land users which is a major component in the scheme used to manage the contention is respected and adhered to by mining companies (in spite of some residual concerns), thanks to a two-part compensation regime structured by the Constitution, the mining law and a tailored regulatory instrument that is heavily influenced by and focused on these traditional minerals. At the start of a project, miners make a one-off compensation payment to farmers and land owners in lieu of crops found on the land and denial of access to surface rights to the land whether cultivated or otherwise. In addition, mining companies pay annual ground rent to land owners.

In the salt sector, however, large-scale producers usually do not follow laid down procedures to pay compensation to affected parties for several reasons. Most salt production activities take place within the vicinities of lagoons that are public commons and nationalized contrary to exploitation of traditional minerals that take place at areas owned by individuals, families and traditional authorities. Large-scale salt producers, therefore, often do not appreciate the need to pay compensation in lieu of denial of access to surface rights to land. Further, the nature of livelihood activities undertaken in these public commons (for example artisanal salt mining and collection of firewood and snails), as well as the fact that undertaking these activities is open to everyone, introduces some complications in possible assessment and payment of compensation to affected individuals and organizations. Consequently, the contention and contestation between large-scale salt producers and salt mining communities often become violent as proponents are unable to pay prompt and adequate compensation to local producers whose livelihood are destroyed.

In light of the above, this study seeks to explore the evolving growing corporate extractivism in the salt sector in Ghana and how civil society is responding to it within a political settlement and infrapolitics theoretical frameworks through ethnographic engagement with affected regions. Specifically, the study examines trends in corporate extractivism in the salt sector, assesses approaches by salt mining companies to manage contention and contestation between them and affected communities; gathers responses by affected communities and civil society to corporate extractivism in the salt sector; and asks what chances exist for civil societies in particular to mediate between salt mining companies and affected communities. The next section reviews corporate extractivism in Ghana to set a context for the study. This is followed by a framing of the political settlement and infrapolitics theoretical frameworks through an ethnographic engagement with affected regions to ground the methodology adopted for the study. The last two sections present study findings on corporate extractivism in Ghana's salt sector and concluding remarks.

## Overview of Extractivism

Extractivism generally refers to an exploitative mode of production that focuses narrowly on extraction of a wide range of natural resources and exporting them in their raw state outside of the jurisdiction where the extraction takes place to fuel manufacturing and industrialization where the resources are destined, usually centres of global capital ([Gudynas 2010](#); [Acosta 2013](#); [Ye et al. 2020](#)). Corporate extractivism, therefore, is a form of extractivism which involves large-scale (usually multinational) corporate organizations or firms. Within the context of Africa and the developing world more broadly, Pereira and Tsikata define extractivism as 'the longstanding colonial and imperialist phenomenon of accumulating wealth by extracting a wide range of natural resources from countries colonized in Africa, Asia and the Americas, and exporting this wealth to the metropolis' ([2021](#), p. 1). The link between extractivism and colonization as implied in this

definition is not hard to establish. The colonial partition of Africa (as well as Asia and the Americas) among European countries in the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century was driven mainly by competition among these countries to secure sources of raw materials that (would be produced and exported in their raw state to fuel manufacturing and industrialization in those countries. Consequently, pre-colonial patterns of production and consumption of minerals, where these activities were firmly located and integrated in the local economy, were radically altered and replaced by a colonially-induced pattern, in which foreign-owned mining enclaves dominated most colonial African economies' (AU and UNECA p. 12).

Ghana's generous natural resource endowments that include but are not limited to minerals, arable lands, water resources and most recently petroleum resources have influenced extractivism and associated economic system over the past couple of centuries. Formerly known as the 'Gold Coast' to reflect the country's rich endowment of gold, Ghana is also endowed with several other minerals such as manganese, bauxite, diamonds, salt, iron and limestone just to mention a few. The colonial government contributed to the creation of political and legal security for corporate extractivism by supporting for firms to acquire and control requisite resources and labor, as well as developed necessary infrastructure to support their operations ([Greenhalgh 1985](#); [Lanning and Mueller 1979](#); and [AU and UNECA 2011](#). In the mining sector, for example, the colonial government actively promoted large-scale foreign-owned gold mining concerns and when access to labor became a problem for these concerns banned artisanal and small-scale gold mining to free up labor for them. Further, the government was instrumental in the search and discovery of manganese in the Gold Coast in 1914 and under the exigencies of the First World War and Russia's ban on manganese exports, the colony quickly became a major exporter of manganese to the United Kingdom and its allies (particularly the United States of America) ([AU and UNECA, 2011](#)).

Extractivism raises a number of issues among proponents and opponents in both policy circles and academia. For governments that have historically supported extractivism in Ghana and around the continent, it is a means of generating foreign exchange earnings, government revenues and employment to facilitate 'development'. In Ghana, for example, three primary commodities that emerge from extractivism (gold, cocoa and timber) have historically contributed the lion's share of all foreign exchange earnings, government revenues and to a lesser extent employment. In light of this, mining (particularly), cocoa and timber sectors of the Ghanaian economy have long been characterized by corporate extractivism with governments designing and implementing policies and regulations to promote the exploitation of these minerals following colonially-created enclave production patterns. On the other hand, opponents to extractivism have raised concerns about chronic economic dependency induced by extractivist production and denial of access to raw materials to spur manufacturing and industrialization. Further, [McKay \(2019\)](#) notes that the structural logic of extractivist production entails dispossession of land and associated destruction of livelihoods that sustain indigenes and their communities, exploitation and uneven distribution of gains and losses associated with extractivist production. [Pereira and Tsikata \(2021\)](#) observe that extractivist production activities are characterized by 'appropriation of land in order to extract natural resources, the dislocation of communities, widening social and economic inequalities, the increasing use of violence to repress resistance, and the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity' (p. 16).

The trends in extractivism across the developing world, in spite of general deepening, have varied and invited some contestations among scholars and in policy circles. Whereas economic globalization and financialization of capital have generally contributed to deepening extractivism ([Gao 2000](#); [Epstein 2005](#)), the seeming return of developmental states in Latin America that have reinvested extractive rents in social programs and structural transformation has brought about the so-called 'neo-extractivism' ([Gudynas 2010](#); [Acosta 2013](#)). Even though 'neo-extractivism' is being presented as post-neoliberal, it is characterized by exploitation of workers, dispossession of land and unmitigated environmental destruction ([Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington 2011](#)). Along with increasing questioning of the utility of extractivism and the growing needs for inclusive and sustainable development, neo-extractivism has influenced a rethink of

extractivism in Africa that reflect in increasing resource nationalism and the adoption of the Africa Mining Vision (AMV) by the African Union. The AMV seeks to transform the mining sector in Africa away from its colonially-created enclave features by integrating the sector more coherently and firmly into the continent's economy and society. Though the implementation of the AMV has been uncertain, there has been increments in rents collected by governments (aided by modest improvement in fiscal regimes) and an emergence of policies and laws that seek to increase the use of local goods and services requirements for extractivist activities as well as the level of beneficiation prior to exports. In Ghana, for example, newly introduced local procurement rules have made some marginal gains in the mining sector ([Atta-Quayson 2022](#)).

In response to extractivism, varying resistance strategies have been adopted by communities and citizens' organizations that are affected extractivism. These strategies to seek to either halt extractivist production activities entirely or bring about some changes in the project design and scope to accommodate concerns of communities and citizens' organizations. Resistance strategies are informed and shaped by the nature of the extractivist production activity and the type of material being extracted. They are also influenced by the extent to which the multiple crises induced by the extractivist activities affect people and their livelihoods ([Hamouchene 2019](#)). In the Songor Lagoon Basin, [Langdon and Larweh \(2017\)](#) share how mobilizations by artisanal salt producers and community members, guided by the ancient Yomo spirit of the area, resisted large-scale salt production activities at the Songor Lagoon Basin in the 1980s. At nearby Keta Lagoon Basin, however, efforts by indigenous people to resist large-scale salt production at the very area where local producers previously won salt have so far not yielded the desired result despite loss of lives and destruction of properties ([Atta-Quayson & Baidoo 2020](#)). These two basins continue to be active sites of resistance against extractivism and as time passes by, the evolving strategies adopted by the opposing sides offer opportunities to re-assess the civil society dimensions and evolutions in resistance mobilizations.

## Political Settlement and Infrapolitics

This paper adopts and combines Mushtaq Khan's theory political settlement and James Scott's theory of infrapolitics ([Khan 2010, 2017](#); [Scott 2005, 2013](#)) to explore increasing corporate extractivism in the salt sector of Ghana and civil society mobilizations against this trend. Political settlements framework offer explanation to key issues that relate to analysis of institutions and policies, especially in developing countries ([Khan 2017](#)). It had been observed that while similar institutional and policy frameworks achieve different results under different contexts, different institutional and policy frameworks solved similar problems under different contexts. This was not only contrary to dominant institutional theory, but emphasized the importance of context, shaped by power distribution among key constituents. Political settlement has, therefore, emerged as relevant governance theory that has been applied to different sectors such as extractivist production sectors to explain outcomes or performance in those sectors.

[Khan \(2017\)](#) defines political settlement as 'a description of power across organizations that are relevant for a specific institutional or policy problem' (p. 4). The political settlement further demonstrates the likelihood that some organizations (based on the power and resources they hold) can outlast competitors in contestations over power and resources (ibid). In order for a distribution of organizational power to be classified as a political settlement it must be fairly stable and capable of reproducing itself. It must also 'tend towards an 'equilibrium' between the distributions of benefits attributed to particular institutions, and the distribution of power across the affected organizations' (p. 5). The prevalence of a political settlement and its tendency towards 'equilibrium', according to proponents, does not mean that the economy or country is performing well or has no violence or contestations over the distribution of benefits and power. Rather, it only suggests that the levels of economic performance and internal violence or contestations produced by the current political settlements or distribution of organizational power are sustainable.

The political settlement theoretical framework has been applied to the political economy of mining in Ghana by [Abdulai \(2017\)](#) to explain why a century of mineral exploitation in Ghana has failed to translate into inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development. Characterizing the key periods over the last century using a typology offered by Khan as dominant settlement (1874-1956), competitive clientelism (1957-1966), vulnerable authoritarianism (1966-1981), dominant leader settlement (1982-1992), and competitive clientelism (1993-2017), the study demonstrates how elites skew public spending (largely financed by mining rents) towards short-term objectives of political survival ([Abdulai 2017](#)). This outcome is contrary to an observation by the study that political elites were committed to utilizing mineral rents on projects and programs in pursuit of inclusive development. This gives a sense that short-term political survival objectives dominated the pursuit of the relatively longer-term objective of inclusive development. The leverage of traditional authorities and chiefs over mineral-rich lands and rural voters underlines their receipt of significant mineral rent from the government that was not necessarily spent on inclusive development, maintaining an 'unproductive peace'.

Further to the political settlement framework, the study also relies on James Scott's theory of infrapolitics which describes various forms of resistance strategies and how these forms are informed by the material conditions of those who are exploited and put up resistance ([Scott 2005](#)). [Scott \(2013\)](#) notes that class relations that are influenced by political, social and economic power differences informs the type, scope and breadth of resistance. It is imperative that resort to infrapolitical strategy be guided by caution as open confrontation in the absence of strong mass mobilization can be fatal, especially for less privileged people in the society. [Torvikey \(2021\)](#) applied Scott's infrapolitics theory to explore resistance by female farmers to reclaim their land and labor in the face of extractivist agricultural production in Southeast Ghana. The study found that the farmers combined both evasive and confrontational resistance strategies against the company through demands for new land, land occupation, and absenteeism among others to rescue the local economy from extractivist agricultural production.

## Methodology

This study sought to explore new extractivism in the salt sector in Ghana over the past decade in order to highlight growing concerns in the sector, contribute to literature on extractivism, and offer recommendations to address these concerns. Given the nature of issues identified to be investigated, a qualitative research approach making use of both primary and secondary sources of data was adopted. Through field visits, observation and semi-structured face-to-face interviews within a context of an ethnographic engagement with affected regions, the author engaged 36 participants ranging from local artisanal and small-scale salt producers, representative of large-scale producers, representatives of traditional authorities, representatives of producer associations and representatives of relevant state agencies. Three focused group discussions were organized to clarify certain issues and triangulate information obtained from interviews. Information gathered from the primary data was complemented by information from secondary sources. The secondary sources included journals, print media and news portals. This study is part of a larger project for a Doctorate of Philosophy degree at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

## New Wave of Extractivism in the Salt Sector: Keta and Songor

Until the discovery of oil and gas in large quantities in Ghana and subsequent production in 2010, there was relative calm at various sites where salt production take place in Ghana. Over the past dozen years, however, the relative peaceful environment in which indigenes in these areas previously lived and undertook their livelihood activities (such as fishing, salt mining and farming) have turned into violent atmosphere in which indigenes are engaged in all manner of fights either among themselves or with a large-scale salt mining company. This has followed the issuance of salt mining leases by the Government of Ghana to

large-scale firms to exploit salt at the same sites where several thousands of local people previously produced the same material for subsistence and commercial purposes. This trend is a continuation of entrenched state preference for large-scale mining in general in spite of its poor contributions to sustained and inclusive growth and development ([Bank of Ghana 2003](#); [Larsen, Yankson & Fold 2009](#); [Atta-Quayson 2022](#)). In the next two sub-sections, the evolution of these fights over the past dozen years in the case of Keta and over the past two years in the case of Songor is presented within a theoretical framing of political settlement and infrapolitics, to illustrate the agency role played by traditional authorities and the dwindling space for civil society engagements and interventions.

## KETA: POST 2010 EXTRACTIVISM AND EVOLVING CONSEQUENCES

In December 2011, Seven Seas Salt Ltd (formerly Kensington Salt Industries Ltd), obtained salt mining leases covering 7,299.41 acres at the eastern banks of the Keta Lagoon where indigenes at Adina, Agavedzi and Blekusu among other communities have historically built various livelihood activities such as salt winning, fishing and farming at the same site leased by the state to Seven Seas Ltd ([Third World Network – Africa 2017](#); [Atta-Quayson & Baidoo 2020](#)). The grant of those leases followed an agreement between the mining company and some traditional authorities in which the latter would receive some benefits for itself and communities to be affected by the operations of the large-scale firm. Over the past few decades, traditional authorities have shown significant interest and support for large-scale mining operations within their jurisdictions, as a means of laying claim on benefit (especially revenue) streams created by the mining activities. The posturing of the traditional authorities reflects evolving political settlements in the salt sector as it serves to increase their benefits and shape elite coalitions relevant for the governance of the sector ([Khan 2010](#); [Atta-Quayson 2022](#)). The support also reflects the brokerage role that traditional authorities play and the power they hold (even though diminishing). In an interview with a former salt producer at Adina, he noted that the support by traditional authorities for a large-scale company to take over the lands for the same activities that they conduct is purely influenced by their desire to position themselves to generate greater benefits from salt mining.

In response to this change, which economically displaced thousands of indigenes along with other negative consequences for ordinary citizens living in nearby communities, sporadic and planned resistance activities were undertaken by residents and loose organizations of citizens in those areas. Between 2013 and 2017, various poorly organized citizens' groups led demonstration activities (including violent protests and clashes) that led to deaths and destruction of properties belonging to the company ([Atta-Quayson & Baidoo 2020](#)) as a means of resisting activities of the company. These demonstrations led to suspension of operations by the company on at least two different occasions to address the fundamental issues that fueled the resistance activities. These issues included non-payment of compensation to indigenes directly affected by activities of Seven Seas Limited, failure on the part of the company to develop some sections of its concession to be used by locals for salt farming activities as agreed and negative environmental impacts associated with the company's resort to underground brine for salt production as opposed to sea brine. The company claimed that prior to its activities, there were no economic activities in those areas so it is not liable for any compensation to the indigenes. It, however, earmarked a certain area to be developed for the indigenes but delayed its development.

The resistance movement against operations of Seven Seas Limited was very strong in the early years, thanks to the support it received from some traditional authorities who had been sidelined in its engagements with key actors as well as former artisanal and small-scale salt producers whose livelihoods were directly impacted without compensation. Since 2018, however, there has been an uneasy calm in the areas with the resistance movement remaining inactive. During interviews with residents and former salt producers in the communities affected by operations of Seven Seas Limited, it emerged that three important factors are responsible for the current uncomfortable calm prevailing in the communities. The

first is the closing of ranks among traditional authorities, especially those at the Agbozume and Tascona areas. Seven Seas Limited's early engagements with traditional authorities, a new 'settlement' strategy in the new era of corporate extractivism, excluded some chiefs in the aforementioned areas. This enraged them and contributed to their serving as the fulcrum around which people organized to resist operations of Seven Seas Limited through demonstrations. One resident's statement on this issue is telling:

Those chiefs who were determined to stop the white man have all changed their minds for reasons best known to them and now do not see anything wrong with their people's source of livelihood taken away from them without any alternative livelihood arrangements or payment of compensation. People are very angry but are unable to translate that anger into an action against the company.

The above remarks demonstrate the importance of the agency role played by the traditional authorities in resistance movement against operations of Seven Seas Limited. The traditional authorities have historically been influential in organizing people in many parts of Ghana and were very influential not only in the slave trade during the colonial period but also the sustainability of the colonial project in general ([Denisova 2020](#)). It is understood from interviews with stakeholders that following the early years of demonstrations and resistance, the company has broadened the scope of traditional authorities engaged. This effectively broadens the elite coalitions and re-established a new political settlement ([Khan 2010](#)).

The second factor that has contributed to the current calm is the seizure of salt mining by artisanal and small-scale salt producers following the take-over of the same space by Seven Seas Limited. Consequently, fledgling artisanal and small-scale salt producer associations in the communities that contributed to the organization people to resist Seven Seas Limited's operations in the early years also gradually collapsed. Thus, the small-scale operators that used to support the resistance have gone into decline due to the concession to Seven Seas, thus undermining the strength of the resistance.

Finally, some residents have chosen to encroach on the concession of the company to fish in the tunnel that conveys sea water to the company's reservoir or collect salt from outskirts of the company's concession. In an interview with an official of the company, the officer indicated that various efforts have been made to stop all forms of encroachment on their concession but to no avail. This reflects an embedded phenomenon in Ghana's mining industry that has come to be known as 'live and let live' ([Aubynn 2006](#)). The company's new 'local settlement' appears to be centered on the 'infrapolitics' of coopting traditional authorities, thus removing leadership from those affected by the large scale operations and also monopolizing access to the concession, but informally enabling access for a small section of the populace on a 'live and let live' model to undertake certain livelihood activities that include menial salt production works and fishing in a manner and areas permitted by the company. In this double move the company displaces its conflict with local livelihoods into internal disputes between traditional authorities and those given privileged access by the company on the one hand, and those who are excluded.

## SONGOR: POST 2020 EXTRACTIVISM AND EVOLVING CONSEQUENCES

Unlike the developments at the eastern banks of Keta lagoon that have dragged for about a decade, the situation at the Songor lagoon dates several decades even though the current wave of extractivism there started a few years ago with the transfer of ownership of Songor Salt Project and grant of three mining leases covering the entire Songor lagoon and adjoining lands to Electrochem Ghana Limited. The previous wave took place in the 1970s and 1980s when the state and relevant traditional authorities granted leases to large-scale companies (Vacuum Salts Limited and Star Chemicals Industries Limited) for salt production at the Songor lagoon, driving local artisanal and small-scale salt producers from spaces they historically occupied. The exclusion and dispossession of local salt producers demonstrated insensitivity to the importance of the lagoon to these people and not only brought about disruptions and destruction of their means of livelihoods but ushered in a long period of conflict between local salt producers and large-scale salt



producers ([Secretaries' Committee of Ada Songor 1989](#); [Langdon & Larweh 2017](#); [Third World Network – Africa undated](#)). The ensuing conflict between the companies and people of Ada over access to the lagoon resources which has been situated within infrapolitics that occasionally turned violent and resulted in loss of lives and destruction of properties, lingered on till 1985 when Margaret Kuwornu, a pregnant woman, was killed by police during one of their raids on members of adjoining communities who were frequently accused of trespassing.

The death of Margaret Kuwornu ushered in a period of calm, reflections and investigations into what has become the first wave of corporate extractivism, noted a former salt producer during an interview. Subsequently, the government cancelled the leases of the two companies and took over the lagoon through the Ada-Songor Lagoon (Site for Salt Industry) (Vesting) Law, 1992 (Provisional National Defense Council Law 287), establishing in its wake the Songor Salt Project (a public entity) to take over the assets of the two companies and manage their operations for and on behalf of the state. Further, and more importantly for the people of Ada, their historical access to the lagoon to undertake their livelihood activities was restored. For almost three decades, the Songor Salt Project co-existed peacefully with artisanal and small-scale salt producers though some individuals illegally asserted undue or non-existent rights to spaces in the lagoon where they created pans for salt production (a phenomenon popularly known as *atsiakpo*). Then came the government's decision during the last quarter of 2020 to grant a monopoly over the salt resources at Songor lagoon to Electrochem Ghana Limited, which represented an overhaul of the salt production system at the Songor and inaugurated a new wave of corporate extractivism similar in many respects to the earlier wave in the 1970s and 1980s as well as to recent developments at Keta lagoon.

As is usually the case in granting of salt mining leases to companies by the state, some negotiations between representatives of Electrochem Ghana Limited and traditional authorities at Ada took place ahead of, and paved way for, the government's decision as well as the company's entry to the site. However, indigenous producers and other stakeholders have raised questions about the legitimacy of these negotiations because they were excluded in these engagements. Further, and as is increasingly becoming the norm in the salt sector, the company has not paid compensation to affected artisanal salt producers who have historically been producing salt at the Songor lagoon. The exclusion of a wide range of stakeholders in the negotiations as well as dispossession of thousands of artisanal producers of the space they conduct their livelihoods activities have facilitated violent resistance against activities of Electrochem Ghana Limited since their inception. The resistance against Electrochem's project has been heightened by a revelation during a focus group discussion with local salt producers and other stakeholders to the effect that the support for Electrochem's project by traditional authorities was based in part on some representations by Electrochem that have turned out to be false. Key among these issues is the total size of concession for the project and whether some communities will be subject to resettlement.

According to one of the local chiefs interviewed, the project proponent indicated that the project will only cover the then Songor Salt Project concession. However, in the lease agreements made available to the communities by the Third World Network – Africa (a civil society organization which offers a range of support services to mining affected communities), the total size of the three restricted mining leases obtained by Electrochem covers 158 square kilometers. This size, according to one of the opinion leaders, is about three times what most traditional authorities were made to believe about the size of concession the company planned to use for its project. Consequently, most of the communities and settlements along the lagoon have been found to be within the concession of Electrochem and potentially subject to resettlement. The issue of resettlement runs deep among the local people as it reflects the possibility that they could lose out on the common resource that the most important livelihood and economic activities in their communities revolves around.

It is against this background and informed by infrapolitics that an evolving conflict, characterized by sporadic and violent demonstrations and clashes, has broken out at the Songor area following the entry

of Electrochem to the site. [Agbove \(2022\)](#) offers a chronology of clashes that have taken place at Songor enclave over the period triggered by the project. Given the initial engagements between representatives of Electrochem Ghana Limited and traditional authorities that also led to a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) between the parties that offer some direct and indirect benefits to the traditional authorities and people of Ada, the conflict started off between the company and supporting traditional authorities<sup>2</sup> on the one side and affected communities along with a few traditional authorities on the other side. According to Third World Network – Africa (undated), citing the MoA, the company has committed itself to the following:

- sharing of 10% of the annual proceeds/profit of the company among the land owning clans and the paramountcy;
- construction of a chief's palace complex for the entire Ada State with each of the 10 clans having offices and conference facilities in the complex;
- payment of quarterly allowances to the paramountcy and land owning clans;
- offering two positions for the traditional authorities on the board of directors of the company to be rotated among the respective clans;
- offering two positions in management for qualified persons from Ada, especially the four landowning clans;
- providing the Ada community with majority chance of employment in the company, including supervisory and other leadership positions (if qualified);
- guaranteeing royalty payments due to the landowning clans and paramountcy;
- supporting the Ada State to enable the clans to participate in the annual Asafotufiam festival<sup>3</sup>;
- undertaking corporate social responsibility activities<sup>4</sup> when fully operational in the areas of education, including physical structures and scholarships for needy but promising students, on the basis of mutual agreement with the land-owning clans and the paramountcy;
- providing prior information to clan heads and paramountcy about agreements with any investor and the Government of Ghana in respect of the project; and
- sharing various important reports (Environmental Social Impact Assessment, environmental permit, minerals Commission report, etc.) with paramountcy and clan heads.

Further to these commitments and in response to the growing resistance that has greeted the project since its inception, the company has established salt production ponds for some communities, arguing that the project fulfils the Master Plan prepared in the early 1990s for the development of Songor lagoon and opponents to the project as well as affected communities are calling for its implementation. Whereas the Master Plan recommends that an independent body be set up as custodian and to regulate the lagoon as a common brine to be relied on by both large-scale firms and artisanal producers that operate legally within the jurisdiction, the current arrangement effectively monopolizes the entire lagoon and its adjoining communities for Electrochem which has then established community ponds under uncertain terms and conditions. This unilateral approach of giving out sections of concession either to disgruntled

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2 It is important to note that there are some traditional authorities, notably the Libi Wornor or the traditional custodian of the Songor lagoon, who are opposed to the project and openly called for the cancellation of the leases.

3 In respect of this, the company started and completed the construction of an ultra-modern Astro turf stadium in a few months for the 2022 Asafotufiam festival.

4 The company has donated large water tanks to some communities and fills them from time to time for the benefit of these communities. Despite acute water problems in these communities, many residents in some of the beneficiary communities do not use the water as a demonstration of their opposition to the project.

communities and/or traditional authorities (without the consent of the Minerals Commission which must trigger a revision in the Mining Lease) is a growing trend which was not only implemented by Seven Seas Limited at Keta (see [Atta-Quayson & Baidoo 2020](#)) but reflects the established order in the gold mining sector where large-scale firm quietly allow artisanal miners to operate on parts of their concessions (see [Aubynn 2006](#); [Hilson & Yakovleva 2007](#)). The durability and sustainability of this trend, however, has been questionable given the conflicts that follow these arrangements. In the case of Ada Songor, there have been some traditional authorities (led by the Libi Wornor, the traditional custodian of the Songor lagoon) who are not part of those that engaged and obtained a MoA with the company. Neither have these traditional authorities expressed interest in the community ponds. Having been growing in number according to one of the chiefs interviewed, they represent a pivot around which resistance movements against the project on the ground have formed.

In all these developments, the role of civil society organizations has been limited and weak, thanks to Electrochem's approach to engagement which prioritizes engagements with traditional authorities over citizens' organizations or producer associations, an approach which follows or reflects industry trend. This is in spite of the relatively stronger presence of civil society in Ada Songor areas compared to the Keta lagoon enclave. As noted earlier, the Songor lagoon already has experience with extractivism in the 1970s and 1980s. This led an appreciable level of mobilization through the establishment of various cooperatives among local people. Though weak in recent times, these cooperatives along with the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF) which operates more as a network of these cooperatives and other allied organizations, have made some efforts to engage with Electrochem without much success. Nonetheless, ASAF and its allied organizations have been instrumental in educating about the consequences of the grant of leases to Electrochem and mobilizing local people for the implementation of the Master Plan. However, the Ada Songor Women's Association (ASWA) made up of female artisanal salt producers and traders established in 2014 by ASAF and other stakeholders has obtained audience with Electrochem, with some of its members having benefited from a microcredit scheme introduced by the company to support artisanal salt producers and traders as part of its approach to the implementation of the Master Plan.

## Conclusion

Keta and Songor lagoon enclaves have over the past decade represented a new frontier where new extractivism in the salt sector in Ghana has emerged. Even though the legal regime recognizes indigenous artisanal salt mining as legitimate, salt mining leases covering areas where local artisans have historically produced salt have been granted to a few large-scale salt producers whose activities have resulted in the dispossession of thousands of local artisans. Whereas the developments at the eastern parts of Keta do not have historical antecedent, those of Songor are reflection of a previous wave of extractivism that took place there in the 1970s and 1980s. Situated within the context of political settlement and infrapolitics theoretical framings, this study presents and discusses the new wave of extractivism impinging on salt production at Keta and Songor lagoon enclaves. This is informed by the agency role played by traditional authorities in the governance of mineral resources in Ghana which has direct and immediate consequences for the role of civil society organizations.

The study finds that traditional authorities remain dominant governance institutions in the governance of salt mining at the Songor and Keta lagoon basins, as large-scale companies prioritize engaging with them over civil society organizations in relation to their mining activities. Whereas such an approach enables project proponents to engage key stakeholders long held as custodians of land resources, it pays little attention to people who have historically constructed livelihoods on the land resources. Clearly, both stakeholders (custodians of land resources and owners of livelihoods constructed on these land resources) are important and deserve to be engaged. The new extractivism in the salt sector, however, prioritizes

engagement with one over the other. This, therefore, raises questions about the durability and sustainability of this approach. So long as the dispossessed and excluded people and citizens' organizations remain jobless and struggle to survive, the companies become obvious targets to vent anger. The situation is worsened by the limited job opportunities created by large-scale salt mining operations as compared to artisanal salt mining activities. The sporadic demonstrations, some of them violent and fatal, are therefore to be expected to continue to characterize the new extractivism in the salt sector.

The study also demonstrates that the terms of 'political settlement' in this new era of extractivism highlight the need to understand its 'infrapolitics' in order to explain its logic. This is more so in relation to the practice of coopting 'traditional authorities' against people who depend heavily on public commons for local salt mining and fishing for their livelihood, and then, as noted, informally offering conditional access to a small section of the populace. This 'political settlement' is founded on pervasive dispossession and structural violence and as a regime that relies on 'divide and rule', and thereby is associated with ongoing contestation and protest. Central in this appears to be the role of the government in granting the concession to accrue benefits for the government itself and shifting responsibility to the company, but also its unavoidable role in maintaining security and threatening forced eviction and relocation: the government is able to distance itself from the logic of corporate extractivism but it is not innocent and may become the target for local opposition. Thus, this model of 'settlement', characterized by widespread dispossession, cooption of traditional authorities and granting of access to a small section of the populace breeds conflictual relations among stakeholders, is unsustainable and may fail.

In light of the importance of the salt industry to the country's manufacturing sector, especially foods and petrochemical industries, as well as its potential for job creation and foreign exchange earnings, it is recommended that the government takes a second look at the manner in which leases have been granted to large-scale companies over the past decade and effectively dispossessing local producers of spaces they have historically undertaken their livelihood activities. Given the limited employment opportunities created by the large-scale salt producers, it is pertinent that the leases are reviewed to allow local artisanal and small-scale producers operate side by side with the large-scale producers at both Songor and Keta lagoon enclaves as envisaged by the Master Plan.

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