

How the Residents of a Moroccan  
Village Resisted a Mining Company

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by

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **How the Residents of a Moroccan Village Resisted a Mining Company**

How did residents of the Moroccan village of Imider challenge the owners? Mining is an important economic activity that drives the growth and development of countries worldwide. However, the social, economic, and environmental impacts of mining can be significant, and the residents of the Moroccan village of Imider have been challenging the owners of the Imider mine due to these impacts. The Imider silver mine is located in the Moroccan village of Imider Tinghir. It is the first silver mine in Morocco and produces approximately 14 to 15 tons of silver a month, making Morocco the 15th largest silver producer globally (Reuters, 2012). Despite the mine's success, the local population's social and economic conditions have remained the same, and poverty remains prevalent in the community. The exploitation the villagers have faced can be described as neocolonial. The mining company is vastly more powerful than the local population. Since 2011, the local community has been protesting the unequal distribution of benefits from the mining operations, lack of transparency, and environmental degradation caused by the mine. Under "The Movement Road 96," the residents have demanded equitable access to the mine's natural, mineral, and human resources (Ahizoon, 2015). With the help of allies from outside of Imider, local residents are working towards promoting sustainable mining practices and ensuring that the benefits of mining operations are distributed more equitably. These efforts are crucial as Imider is facing pressing issues such as high unemployment rates, environmental degradation, and water scarcity. Addressing these issues is essential to achieving sustainable development and social justice in the community.

### **Review of Research**

Chabukdhara and Singh (2016) studied coal mining in the region and its environmental effects, such as air and water pollution, soil degradation, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity. They attribute these problems to insufficient regulation, poor planning of the mines, and ineffective ecological monitoring and management. The authors recommend mine reclamation, waste management, and afforestation.

Olalekan, Afees and Ayodele (2016) assessed the mining sector's contribution to Nigeria's economic development. The authors use a quantitative research approach to analyze data from the Central Bank of Nigeria and the National Bureau of Statistics to determine the sector's contribution to GDP, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. The researchers conclude that the mining's contribution to Nigeria's economy has been low relative to its potential.

Arcand et al. (2014) studied the devastating impact of landmines on child health in Angola. In doing, the authors have shed light on inequities in the risk exposure attributable to large-scale human activity. The authors consider child mortality, morbidity, and disability. Their results indicate that boys in general, and children from poorer households, are more likely to be injured or killed by a landmine. The authors recommend mine clearance programs, better healthcare access, and educational campaigns about landmine risks.

### **Unemployment in the Imider region**

Unemployment in the Imider region has been exacerbated by the decline of farming and the hiring practices of the mine operators. Imider is a village group located in the province of Tinghir, within the Drâa-Tafilalet region in central eastern Morocco. According to 2004 statistics, the community's total population was about 3,936 people living in 507 families

(Amira, 2019). The strange thing about this poor area is that it contains one of the largest silver mines in the country. Despite this, the region suffers from marginalization, poverty, and deprivation as it lacks even the most basic necessities for a decent life, such as hospitals. In the Imider region, there is only one clinic where one nurse works, but it often closes its doors due to what residents describe as repeated robberies (Amira, 2019). Ahmed Sidky, a member of parliament from the Tinghir region which includes the Imider village, stated, "A pregnant woman here is forced to travel at least 160 kilometers to reach Ouarzazate Hospital to give birth. This is unfair." He also added, "Tinghir is like the area of Lebanon." (Reuters, 2012) The students in the Imider region have to walk for three hours or more on unpaved dirt roads to get to school, which explains the high drop-out rate in the area, as well as the low attendance rate. Poverty also contributes to the low turnout for studies in the region. The teacher, Fatima, stated that "her students walk for up to two hours to reach the school." She added that "some of them live three kilometers away, while others have to walk nine kilometers to reach the school. In addition, many people in the region are unable to afford pens and books." (Reuters, 2012) The region is also experiencing high rates of unemployment. Furthermore, farming is declining, and the company recruits workers from outside the community. As a result, the people of the region are wondering how it is possible that the company's net profits between January and June of 2018 exceeded 600 million euros or more than 2.11 billion dirhams (Amira, 2019), while the local residents lack even the basic necessities.

On the other hand, the company that manages the mine says it has spent between one and two million dirhams (90 and 180 thousand dollars) to finance development in the region during the past few years (Reuters, 2012). Abdel Razzak Kamira, director of the precious metals department at the Mines Company, the largest mining company in Morocco, said, "The problem

is that the expectations of the residents of the region are unrealistically high regarding what the company can offer." (Reuters, 2012)

The protesters demanded that 75 percent of job opportunities in the mine be allocated to the region's residents, but the company considered this demand unrealistic (Proxy, 2012). Youssef Al-Hijam, one of the group's managers, said, "Our goal is for 60 percent of the employees to come from the residents of the region, but they refused to listen." He added that the employment of staff is subject to a transparent process that takes place at the company's headquarters in Casablanca (Proxy, 2012). The Imider Mineral Company released a statement in response to the protests of the region's people, stating that it has been a significant contributor to the economic and social development of the region since its establishment in the 1960s (Hespress, 2012). The company claimed to be the primary employer in the region, with 1,000 collaborators and 200 seasonal jobs allocated to students during holidays. In addition, the company stated that it supports young entrepreneurs in the region by promoting their small and medium-sized enterprises related to the metallurgical industry. The statement also highlighted the company's contribution to establishing social facilities, such as clinics, mosques, cultural centers, nurseries, sports fields, and women's clubs. The company further claimed to provide housing for over 300 families and to support educational institutions in Imider by providing transportation for over 150 students and training opportunities for approximately 200 students during the summer holidays (Hespress, 2012).

### **Environmental degradation and health effects**

Since the experiment supervised by the Moroccan newspaper "Al-Masaa" in December 2013, the public has been warned about the dangers to their health and the environment

(Hespress, 2012). The experiment revealed that chronic diseases are widespread, with increasing deaths due to heart attacks, cancer, skin and respiratory diseases, and other serious illnesses. These diseases pose a severe threat to the lives of the population, and the situation is exacerbated by Maaden Imider's plan to expand the mine and production units. This expansion will inevitably increase the volume of toxic mine waste, further exposing the population to dangerous substances. In addition, climate changes are disrupting the environmental balance, particularly biodiversity and the balance of agricultural seasons. The mine extracts more than 200 tons of silver and one ton of mercury annually, which are highly demanded in the electronics market (Aljamaa, 2019). However, the mine also releases toxic chemicals, such as cyanide, mercury, lead, cadmium, antimony, and arsenic, into the environment, posing a severe threat to the health of the residents (Aljamaa, 2019). The waste from the mine has led to the formation of large tailings ponds visible from Mount Alban in the village, which are highly contaminated with these toxic chemicals. "Cancer has entered our villages; people have got problems with their eyes," said 27-year-old Omar Ouadadouch. "Those diseases did not exist before. We want an independent investigation, as the only cause we can think of for those diseases is the mine" (Green, 2015).

The company responded, "The mine has no negative impact on the environment, studies show. People who work in the mine do not suffer health issues, and the riverbanks are not polluted" (Green, 2015). Abdul Razzaq Kamira, the Director of the Precious Metals Department, addressed the accusations against the company by stating that they strictly adhere to the international standards that govern the industry (Attacmaroc, 2017). Kamira also expressed their intense awareness of their responsibility towards the environment and the belief that prevention is always better than cure. In light of this, the Director strongly denied all the allegations made

against the company. The company's position is that they take their environmental responsibility seriously and follow industry standards to ensure that their operations do not have a negative impact on the environment (Attacmaroc, 2017). By denying the allegations made against them, the company is affirming its commitment to conducting its business operations in a responsible and sustainable manner.

For decades, Imider residents, who are primarily ethnic Amazighs, say the mine has drained their water reserves and devastated their agricultural community. The mine uses 1,555 cubic meters of water per day, which is 12 times the village's daily consumption, according to a report by the Global Amazigh Congress (Bouhmouch & Bailey, 2015). Imider's khettara system, a traditional underground canal network that has provided water to farmers in the desert region since the 14th century, has also been devastated by the mine, according to a report by INNOVAR (Bouhmouch & Bailey, 2015). The villagers have engaged in various means of protest against the mine for nearly three decades, including a 1996 sit-in that blocked traffic on the road passing through Imider for 45 days. Although the protesters' encampment began with the village youth overtaking the mountain, it has grown to include villagers of all ages. The protesters hope their encampment will pressure the government to end the mine's overexploitation of the village's water, provide jobs to village residents, and establish a local school and hospital.

The mine's 3 owners claimed that the mine has contributed to the region's development, notably in terms of infrastructure, with construction in Tinghir. However, the Imider activists say these contributions are insignificant and do not benefit their village. On the other hand, The Imider Mine's statement regarding the impact of their water bed usage on the region and environment reads, The excavations for water supply have been authorized by competent authorities, following a study conducted by a specialized office to determine any potential effects. This study

concluded that there is no connection between the water bed used by the mine and the sources that supply local irrigation networks. Furthermore, the mine prioritizes environmental concerns and has implemented an environmental management methodology that enables it to anticipate and mitigate potential risks posed by its activities. The mine has a controlled system for storing and managing its waste and recycles water for reuse in mineral processing. These measures allow the mine to operate while minimizing its impact on the surrounding environment. (Hespress, 2012)

### **Other environmental effects of regional mines**

In Morocco, the Imider mine and the phosphate mine have had substantial environmental and public health effects. Morocco is home to the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), one of the world's largest phosphate fertilizer producers, with a global market share of over 30% (Hakkou, Benzaazoua, & Bussière, 2016). Morocco's phosphate reserves are vast and are projected to meet the demand for centuries to come, with deposits found in three main areas - Khouribga, Gantour, and Layoune-BouCraa. (Hakkou, Benzaazoua, & Bussière, 2016). However, fertilizer production is a highly polluting industry, and the environmental and health impacts of the phosphate industry are significant. The air in the surrounding areas is polluted with toxic gases, including sulfur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), sulfur trioxide (SO<sub>3</sub>), hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S), and hydrogen fluoride (HF), as well as fine and coarse dust. These pollutants can cause respiratory diseases and cancers. In addition, the production of fertilizers generates large quantities of waste, including phosphogypsum, which contains uranium and is stored in huge piles near the factories. Phosphogypsum is the world's largest source of very weak radioactive waste.

A report published in 2012 by the Centre for Social and Historical Studies and Documentation on Phosphates, a trade union-affiliated organization, highlighted the poor health of OCP employees. The report revealed that in 2012, respiratory system infections among employees were as high as 37%, while 62% of workers were exposed to dust, gases, and radiation at their workstations (SwissAid, 2019). Unfortunately, these statistics are still held today, according to trade union sources, indicating that the situation has yet to improve. In February 2019, SWISSAID conducted an analysis of water samples taken from the industrial effluents discharged into the sea in Safi and Jorf Lasfar. The samples were found to be polluted with uranium, with levels ranging from 0.27 to 0.45 mg/l. The uranium comes from phosphogypsum, a byproduct of the manufacture of phosphate fertilizers that is contaminated with uranium (SwissAid, 2019). The production of phosphoric acid releases sulfur dioxide, which can lead to respiratory problems in people living nearby.

The town of Safi has a population of approximately 308,000 people and is located about 10 km from the Safi OCP chemical complex. The first suburbs of the city are located two kilometers from the site. In February 2019, SWISSAID interviewed residents, who regularly complained about emissions from the factory. Several people reported that toxic emissions and dust from the OCP complex can be detected as far away as the town of Safi and that residents suffer from respiratory and eye diseases as a result (SwissAid, 2019). Phosphoric mining has been a major economic activity in many cities, and as a result, numerous studies have been conducted to understand its impact on the environment, economy, and society. In contrast, studies on silver mining in the city of Tinghir Imider are relatively scarce, despite the fact that it is a significant economic activity in the region. This lack of attention towards the mining industry in Tinghir Imider raises questions about the government's priorities and their

commitment to developing the region's economy. Moreover, the disparity in the attention given to different mining activities in the various areas may also shed light on the marginalization of the Tinghir region by the government. The lack of investment and support for the mining industry in Tinghir Imider could be seen as evidence of the government's neglect of the region, leading to a lack of economic development opportunities and a sense of exclusion among the local population.

In addition to phosphate, of which the Kingdom has 75% of the global reserves, there are other mineral mines in the country, such as iron, lead, silver, zinc, copper, and others, in various regions, whose production is directed mainly for export (Aljazeera, 2018). In 2016, the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council, an esteemed advisory body, released a comprehensive Total Wealth Report. The report revealed that the minerals sector had substantially contributed 8.3% to the average value of national exports from 1999 to 2013. Yet, it accounted for less than 1% of job opportunities (Aljazeera, 2018).

Despite the wealth of mineral resources in Morocco, distributed in the Moroccan margin, the areas that host these resources remain outside development and demonstrate a paradoxical blend of prosperity and vulnerability. One such city is Ouarzazate, situated 165 km from Tinghir. In the city's periphery, the Bouazzer cobalt mine is 34 km from Taznakht in southeast Morocco. Unfortunately, residents residing near the mine are afflicted with diseases caused by pollution, revealing a tragic and unnecessary cost of mineral extraction practices. The residents and laborers of the Bouazzer cobalt mine chant a solemn prayer, "O God, this is a reprehensible act," every day. These individuals have sacrificed their health and well-being for the company's success, toiling relentlessly in harsh conditions to provide for their basic needs. They work hard, slicing through life's challenges, struggling to earn their livelihood and secure their safety

(Sawteouarzazate, 2017). According to some workers who have experienced the mine's operations during the colonial period, working conditions were much better. The company was dedicated to providing employee benefits and, most importantly, treating them humanely. However, the current conditions have deteriorated, leading the workers to express their discontent through daily chants (Sawteouarzazate, 2017).

The region is suffering from a severe environmental catastrophe, as toxic solid and liquid waste produced by the mine has contaminated the air and water, depriving residents of a healthy environment. The danger of pollution is evident in the numerous illnesses afflicting locals. Khadija, one of the affected villagers, expressed her despair, stating that the women in her village are utterly isolated, lacking access to basic facilities like schools and clubs. The only dispensary in the village is rarely open, and the nearby school needs to be improved. The worst part is the constant threat of toxins that harm the population, leading to displacement and exclusion. Khadija's plea and the community's demands are simple - a safe school for their children that protects them from daily struggles (Sawteouarzazate, 2017).

According to data from the Mining Group, cobalt metal contributes 36% of the principal transactions in minerals in Morocco, among the top 5 producers of high-purity cathode cobalt globally. Morocco ranks 11th in the world in terms of global cobalt reserves, with 17,600 tons, and annually produces over 2,000 tons, according to official data (Hassan, 2022). Cobalt is considered a fundamental and strategic mineral in the energy transition and sustainable transportation, as it is used in rechargeable batteries. Abdullah Motaki, the General Secretary of the National Office of Hydrocarbons and Minerals, explains that Morocco produces cobalt with higher purity than other exporting countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has the most significant global reserves. The "Bouazzer" mine is the only mine from

which cobalt is extracted as a base metal. Motaki emphasizes that Morocco plays an essential role in cobalt supply chains worldwide, and the "Managem" group diversifies its partnerships in this field through agreements with international companies, such as the latest one with the "Renault" group to supply their cobalt needs to achieve the goal of moving towards the electric car industry (Hassan, 2022). The French automotive group, Renault, has recently partnered with the Moroccan Mines Group to purchase cobalt sulfate to produce electric cars. The agreement specifies an annual supply of 5,000 tons of Moroccan cobalt sulfate to Renault for seven years, beginning in 2025 (Hassan, 2022).

Although the mine extracts tons of minerals annually, the village has not benefited from the profits in infrastructure or development projects. Instead, they have only experienced pollution and drought, which the company blames on natural factors to justify the negative impact of their irresponsible activities on the village.

## **Conclusion**

The silver mine has caused tensions between the Imider village and neighboring villages. Despite being in the city of Tinghir, Imider has claimed that the silver mine is on their land, denying other villages the opportunity to benefit from it. As a result, neighboring villages have chosen to distance themselves from Imider and refrain from offering support. This has created a rift between the communities, hindering cooperation and development in the area. One lesson that can be learned from the situation in Imider is the importance of transparency and equitable distribution of benefits. Mining companies and local authorities must prioritize the involvement and input of all affected communities in decision-making processes. This would ensure that all communities have a say in mining activities and how the benefits are distributed. Collaboration

and cooperation between neighboring communities can also lead to shared resources and development that benefit everyone in the region. Another lesson that can be learned from comparing the Imider and phosphate mines is the stark difference in awareness and action regarding the health and environmental issues nearby communities' face. In the region of phosphate mining, studies have been conducted, and people are aware of the pollution and associated health risks. On the other hand, in Tinghir and Ouarzazate, there is a significant lack of awareness and action regarding the issues faced by the community. Despite the suffering experienced by the people, there is little to no action taken to address their plight.

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