

## Gold Mining (artisanal gold mining): Is it an engine of development in Mauritania?

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## | The Author

**Dr. Moustapha Taleb Heidi** has worked for several years as a researcher on Western Maghreb's social dynamics. His latest work has focused on artisanal mining in northern Mauritania as part of the CAPSAHARA Project (Critical Approaches to Politics, Social Activism and Islamic Militancy in the Western Saharan Region) funded by the European Research Council. From 2012 to 2017, Dr. Heidi taught mainly about territories and migrations at the University of Nouakchott in Mauritania. Previously, he collaborated with several development programs in Mauritania and West Africa, particularly in Mali and Senegal. Finally, he received the Swiss Transdisciplinarity Award in 2004 for taking part in the international research group "One health.". He is a research fellow at [www.extractivism.de](http://www.extractivism.de).

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## | IN SHORT

EN

- In 2021, Mauritania exported approximately 13 million tons of iron, 20% of which was bound for Western Europe.
- The economic structure of this country is increasingly rent based.
- The extractive sector does not act as a catalyst for the country's development. Its contribution to poverty reduction remains insignificant.
- Poverty remains a significant feature of the country, ranking 157th out of 189 according to the Human Development Index in 2020.

DE

- Mauretanien exportierte im Jahr 2021 etwa 13 Millionen Tonnen Eisen, von denen 20 % für Westeuropa bestimmt waren.
- Die Wirtschaftsstruktur des Landes ist zunehmend von Renten geprägt.
- Der Rohstoffsektor wirkt nicht als Katalysator für die Entwicklung des Landes. Sein Beitrag zur Armutsbekämpfung ist unbedeutend.
- Das Land ist weiterhin von Armut gekennzeichnet. Nach Daten des Human Development Index steht das Land im Jahr 2020 an 157. von insgesamt 189 Stellen.

FR

- En 2021, la Mauritanie a exporté environ 13 millions de tonnes de fer, dont 20 % vers l'Europe occidentale.
- La structure économique du pays est de plus en plus rentière, avec une augmentation importante et diversifiée de la production de matières premières, dont la quasi-totalité est destinée aux marchés étrangers.
- Le secteur extractif ne joue pas le rôle de vecteur du développement du pays et sa contribution à la réduction de la pauvreté reste négligeable.
- La pauvreté reste une caractéristique majeure du pays, classé 157 sur 189 selon l'indice de développement humain en 2020.

ES

- En 2021, Mauritania exportó aproximadamente 13 millones de toneladas de hierro, el 20% de las cuales se destinaron a Europa Occidental.
- La estructura económica de este país es cada vez más rentista, con un aumento importante y diversificado de la producción de materias primas que se dirigen casi en su totalidad a los mercados extranjeros.
- El sector extractivo no actúa como catalizador del desarrollo del país y su contribución a la reducción de la pobreza, sigue siendo insignificante.
- La pobreza sigue siendo una característica principal del país, puesto que en 2020 ocupa el puesto 157 de 189 según el Índice de Desarrollo Humano.

# Mining, Poverty and the State in Mauritania: Do they always go together?

In 2021, Mauritania exported approximately 13 million tons of iron, 20% of which was bound for Western Europe, respectively: Italy, Germany, France and Spain (SNIM, 2022). In fact, the economic structure of this country is increasingly rentier with an important and diversified increase in the production of raw materials (iron ore, copper, gold, silver, oil and soon natural gas<sup>1</sup>) that are almost entirely directed to foreign markets. The share of this rapidly developing sector reaches more than 66% of exports and more than a quarter of GDP (World Bank, 2022). Its capital-intensive dimension has attracted significant foreign direct investment over the past two decades.<sup>2</sup> However, despite this macro-economic importance, the extractive sector does not act as a catalyst for the country's development, and its contribution, in particular, to poverty reduction, remains insignificant. Indeed, what sense can these figures of extractive dynamics really have, if one takes into consideration that poverty remains a major feature of the country, ranking 157th out of 189 according to the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2020)?<sup>3</sup>

The extroverted nature of Mauritania's extractive sector is not really an exception in the region. Indeed, as in other neighboring countries, the conditions specific to this type of economy, such as the fluctuating prices of these exported<sup>4</sup> materials, their low added value at the local level and the problematic management/distribution of their revenues, constitute a real economic liability (Margin, 2015). In the particular case of Mauritania, the political instability of the country, which has been in a state of political transition

since 1978, does not favor true development (Ciavolella and Fresia, 2009).<sup>5</sup>

The Mauritanian state introduced several reforms to improve the performance of its mining sector. Among these attempts was the opening of its "industrial" (extractive) entities to foreign capital after several decades of exclusive state investment. It is within this framework that the Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM), the largest mining company in the country and a long-time symbol of nationalization, has opened up to foreign capital since the 1980s with shareholders such as Kuwait (7.7%), Iraq (5.7%) and Morocco (2.3%) as well as private partners.<sup>6</sup> Other measures include the revision of the legal framework (the mining code of 2012) in order to make it more attractive to operators. In 2016, the number of mining permits (all materials) amounted to 201 for the benefit of 150 companies (EITI.Org 2018).

However, this economic policy that opens up broad horizons (not necessarily adapted to the national institutional capacity) did not translate into tangible and rapid progress in the living conditions of citizens. Between 2012 and 2016, youth unemployment rose from 18% to 24% (ONS, 2017).

As this example on unemployment illustrates, the rentier economy adopted since 1960 in Mauritania as the "engine" of development seemed to be synonymous with the deterioration of the population's living conditions.

Paradoxically, the country's political field remained immobile with respect to this situation. In other words,

this global decline in the price of the mineral hit Mauritania's public finances hard. Government revenues from extractive industries fell by 24% in 2013 to USD 408 million.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the date of July 10, 1978 corresponds to the first military coup that ended the civilian rule of the father of Mauritanian independence, Mokhtar Ould Dadah. Several coups/palace revolutions and even changes through elections (2007, 2009 and 2019) followed, but without real changeover (see Brites et al., 2021).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.snim.com/index.php/societe/actionnariat.html>

<sup>1</sup> In 2018, Mauritania and Senegal reached a final investment decision with energy companies BP and Kosmos Energy for the Greater Tortue Ahmeyim project, which is expected to generate USD 19 billion in government revenues over the next three decades.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2007, several multinationals have invested in Mauritania, including Kinross Gold Corporation (in gold), Xtrata (in iron) and First Quantum Minerals Limited (in copper).

<sup>3</sup> According to official figures, about 30% of Mauritanian households are affected by poverty (ANSAD, 2019).

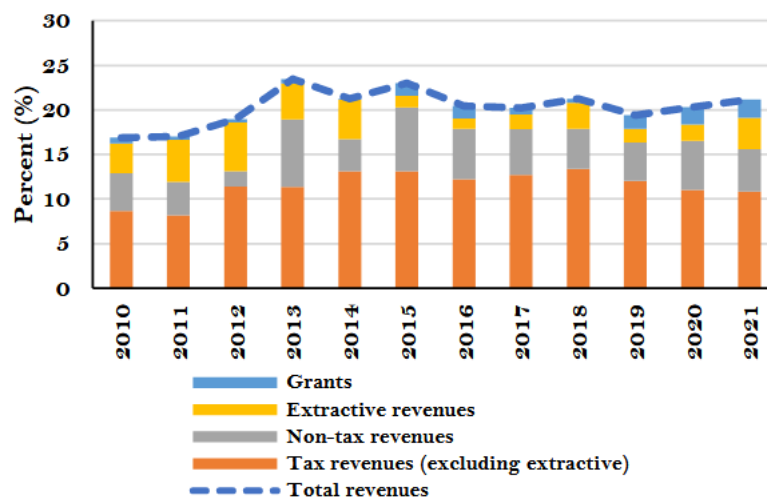
<sup>4</sup> Between 2013 and 2017, the global price of iron lost more than ⅓ of its value, from 150 USD to 50 USD. During this period,

the economic issue remained the poor relation of the national political debate. This is all the more surprising given that the political landscape is pluralist and includes the most varied trends in terms of ideologies and societal visions (NDiaye, 2010). The political entities juxtapose different forces: traditional oligarchy, radical Arab-Berber nationalism on the one hand and Afro-Mauritanian nationalism on the other, political Islamism (Rassemblement National pour la Réforme et le Développement Tawasul), as well as social democratic-Marxist tendencies (Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques, Union des Forces du Progrès, etc.).

These actors in Mauritania's political system rarely converge on a challenge to the precarious economic context. The only visible exception was the rare parliamentary investigation into corruption launched in 2020 against the country's former president Ould Abdel Aziz,<sup>7</sup> the outcome of which is still unclear. In fact, when their political antagonisms do not concern the question of identity and its corroborations, the polemics generally turn to the daily management of public affairs.

The issues of unemployment, which is worsening year after year due to the lack of economic opportunities to absorb it, social inequalities, and problems of access to basic services or housing are rarely addressed or are addressed without deep questioning of their structural causes. Apparently, a political line based on a global analysis combining political, social, and economic fields seems to be over. Such an impulse was present at the beginning of the period of state formation and particularly in the 1970s with the National Democratic Movement (MND) and the "party of the Kadihines of Mauritania," both of which are close to leftist ideology (Vergara, 1976).

**Table 1: Composition of total revenues (% of GDP)<sup>8</sup>**



In these conditions of economic impasse, the recourse of Mauritanian populations to other forms of innovative activities can be perceived as alternatives that question the economic, social, and even political choices in place in the country. Artisanal gold mining, which is a recent

activity in Mauritania, can be analyzed from this perspective.

<sup>7</sup> The former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (2009-2019) is awaiting trial.

<sup>8</sup> Source: World Bank, 2022

# Gold rush: a popular response to economic policies or another development model?

Over the past two decades, the artisanal mining sector in Africa has grown significantly (Banchirigah 2006; Østensen and Stridsman 2017: 33, 37). In 2019, approximately ten million people were engaged (with or without formal authorization) in artisanal and small-scale mining activities, covering gold, diamond, and coltan deposits (World Bank 2019: 13).

In Mauritania, with the exception of a few small salt mines in the north, artisanal mining remained unknown until 2016. For this reason, the national mining code did not include such activity, although its beginnings followed later, leading to various amendments to the 2008 law.<sup>9</sup>

In 2016, the situation completely changed with the transfer of thousands of people who were investing in the Inchiri desert (about 250 km north of Nouakchott),

not far from the Tasiast mining company's license area. These fortune seekers in search of gold in the Saharan landscape reacted to rumors across the country about the discovery of large quantities of the material. Initially using simple metal detectors, they engaged a few weeks later in new and more daring and advanced modes of exploration (drilling of wells and galleries) and which suggest a long term of their action. The introduction of these practices was facilitated by the arrival of migrants from Mali and Sudan, two countries historically known for this phenomenon and having experienced a boom since the second decade of 2000 (Chevrillon-Guibert and Magrin, 2018).

**Photo 1: Gold panners in the southern zone of Tasiast, May 2021, © MT Heidi**



<sup>9</sup> The mining code dates back to 2008 (law n° 2008-011 of April 27, 2008). It has been amended several times since then: in 2009 (Law No. 2009-026 amending certain provisions

of Law No. 2008-011 of 27 April 2008), 2012 and 2014. We note that some of these amendments relate to artisanal quarries.

Over the years, the gold mining area has continued to expand, covering new regions of the country, and involving more people. This situation includes the demographic growth of existing sites, as well as mobility between sites and the opening of new sites even in remote areas, as in the case at Gleib Ndour in the border triangle with Algeria and Mali (Taleb Heidi, 2022).

Statistics on the demographic aspects of this activity are scarce, given its informal nature, but the official estimate was around 60,000 people. However, this figure refers to those directly involved in the field. An extension to indirect employment in the rest of the value chain (materials processing, logistics service providers, gold buyers, etc.) easily brings the figure to 200,000 people (AMI, 2020).

How could this human mobilization have occurred in such a short period of time? What were its main meanings then, and what are the current ones?

Questioning the motivations for this "migration", "reconversion", "Saharan adventure" can only take into account the context of the country developed above. Indeed, taking into account the availability of this mass to undertake activities based on physical strength in the difficult climatic conditions of the Sahara and without guarantee of results is highly revealing. In any case, in view of the living environment created from scratch by these gold miners, the norms of living together that they have been able to develop during these five years of existence and their overall organization and economic dynamics, show that we are dealing with a real social movement (Taleb Heidi, 2022). It is true that the gold miners are not a homogeneous group, but their majority does reflect the unemployment figures mentioned above. In sum, their movement would be a subtle form of protest against previously existing conditions and an immense hope for change.

## Economic contribution of gold mining and the role of the Mauritanian State

According to a 2018 study conducted by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) on Mauritania, the socio-economic contributions of gold mining are clearly significant. Mauritania's gold mining industry generated more than €833 million in annual sales, 67% of which were made in Chami and 37% in Zouerate, the two leading towns in this sector. It created more than €819 million in added value, distributed between these two mining towns (GIZ, 2022). According to the same study, this added value represents 73% of the added value of the gold mining activity carried out by the two international companies (Tasiast and MCM) and was almost equal to the added value of iron mining carried out by SNIM (mentioned above), i.e., approximately €153 million in 2018 (Agence Mauritanienne d'Information citing GIZ, 2020).

An economic sector of this importance could not escape public authority. In this sense, the attitude of the Mauritanian state has gradually changed from restrictive, even repressive, measures at the beginning of the activity (2016) to a more understanding attitude and a legal and operational framework in subsequent years. Full recognition and implementation of a policy of

integration of this sector occurred in 2020 with the establishment of an institution dedicated to this activity.<sup>10</sup> The dialogue with the gold miners will then take a new turn that the stakeholders hoped would be more realistic and beneficial. In any case, it was an administrative aspect that the gold miners hoped would replace the omnipresence of the security forces, which in their eyes could symbolize a period of repression and illegality.

The dialogue with the gold miners will then take a new turn that the stakeholders hoped would be more realistic and beneficial. In any case, it was an administrative aspect that the gold miners hoped to see instead of the omnipresence of security forces, representing in their eyes a period of repression and illegality.

In doing so, the State seeks to position itself as a central actor in the social and economic dynamics of the phenomenon, which continues to grow. Indeed, if the economic stakes related to employment and income are important in gold mining, it also presents several challenges in the context of sustainable development.

<sup>10</sup> Decree 2020-065 dated July 18, 2020 created a public establishment of an industrial and commercial nature called

Maaden (Mines of Mauritania) with the mission of supervising artisanal and semi-industrial mining.

## | Gold mining as an attraction for new actors

The development of gold mining is attracting new players who seek to deal with the accumulated tailings in the mining processing centers. This area requires greater technical expertise and more capital. Mauritanian legislation concerning gold mining classifies it as semi-industrial. The Mauritanian Information Agency notes that 30,000 licenses have already been distributed. Investors in this component include nationals but also Sudanese, Turkish and Chinese investors (AMI, 2020).

Furthermore, on a political level, we observe that gold mining constitutes a positioning area for certain political actors. The latter are attentive to the precarious situation of workers in this sector. The campaign of the candidate for the last presidential elections in 2019, Mr. Biram Dah Abeid, is a good example of this type of intervention through his visit in 2022 to the mining town of Chami and to certain gold-mining localities and his speeches to the masses (lauthentic.info).

## | Challenges of gold mining: the other side of this activity

In addition to the advantages noted above, this artisanal mining sector also presents a problematic facet with contextual elements that cannot help but inspire concern for health, environment, and safety. These dimensions constitute the vulnerability of the sector but require precautionary solutions to ensure sustainability.

In fact, the mineral materials transported from the extraction sites are treated with mercury at the crushing/grinding sites, even though it is a highly toxic

product and the subject of an international convention. How can we protect people and the environment and ensure that the gold mining process does not involve the release of mercury into the environment, thus polluting the soil and water resources (photo 2)?

**Photo 2: Treatment with mercury in the Chami mining center © MT Heidi, 2021**

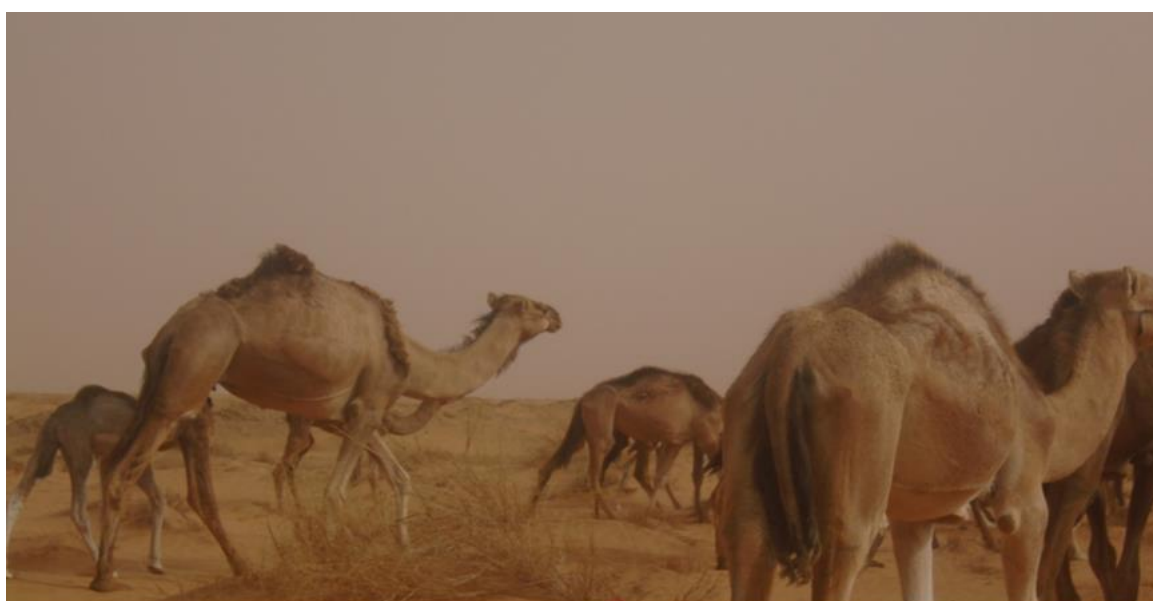




In fact, the treatment sites were set up by the State to help protect the natural environment, but their current locations are temporary and do not really meet this initial objective. The particular conditions of the emergence of the phenomenon could explain this situation. However, their eventual and necessary relocation poses many problems both in terms of

logistics and in terms of conflicts of interest for other groups/users such as transhumant herders who fear for their pastoral areas and the inhabitants close to the target areas (photo 3).

**Photo 3: Camel transhumance in an area targeted by gold mining, @MT Heidi, 2021**



Another challenge of this activity is security. Indeed, taking place in desert confines and with little public control, potential crime, terrorism or human rights violations cannot be overlooked. In similar geographical

contexts, gold mining has been reported as a destabilizing and insecure factor (Grégoire et al, 2011; Barroux in Le Monde, 2014).

## Conclusion

Gold mining is a recent activity in Mauritania compared to other neighboring countries. It now presents itself as an economic opportunity and a popular choice among the unemployed who have been left behind by the government in the cities and among youth who are increasingly disillusioned by the failure of government programs to integrate them into the labor market.

Gold mining has achieved positive economic results along the entire value chain of this activity.

The management of this sector presents serious challenges owing to mass migration, the remoteness of extraction sites, environmental problems related to the use of mercury, and security issues. The Mauritanian government is seeking to position itself as a central player in this sector through several regulatory and operational initiatives. However, awareness and training programs for this population are required, as well as a more inclusive policy to identify and institutionalize the networks and socio-economic dynamics present in this Saharan part of Mauritania today.

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# EXTRACTIVISM

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## | The Project

The collaborative research project ***extractivism.de*** links the Universities of Kassel and Marburg. The project scrutinizes the extractivist development model and proposes new economic, political, and sociological conceptions of extractivism. It preliminarily focuses on Latin America and the Maghreb patterns. The project researches the conditions under which these patterns affect the persistence and transformative capacity of extractivism and its respective institutional settings. Finally, it explores how extractivism affects cultural processes and habitual routines and questions under what conditions and how far the development model extends into institution-building and social practice, i.e., everyday life.

The project aims to understand extractive societies not as deviants from the Western trajectory of development but in their own logic and their own particularities. The project, therefore, combines a strong empirical focus with theoretical work. It links both broad field research and data gathering of primary data and the qualitative and quantitative analysis of available secondary sources with a stringent transregional comparison. It develops methods in cross-area studies and investigates whether and why similar patterns of social change emerge in different areas and world regions despite significant cultural, social, or religious differences. Finally, the project intends to translate the findings for politics, society, and development cooperation.

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