

Investigating complexities and opportunities related to extractivism in Africa

By Mark Volmink

Africa's political economy is significantly shaped by extractivism, a post-colonial model that typically results in economic and social inequalities, environmental degradation and social unrest.



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Abstract

Extractivism in Africa presents a paradox of substantial economic opportunities and significant social, environmental and political complexities. Africa's rich natural resources have attracted foreign investment, contributed to economic growth and improved infrastructure. This article examines how extractivism has led to displacement, human rights violations, environmental degradation and corruption, perpetuated by neocolonialism. Based on a review of literature, this article draws on insights from several sources, including articles and reports, and describes concepts and a theoretical framework relevant to extractivism in Africa. While the findings of this study articulate the challenges and complexities of extractivism, they also present opportunities that exist for Africa to harness its resources for inclusive growth and sustainable development. This necessitates the enhancement of institutional capacity, promoting transparency and accountability and ensuring participation in global trade. Regional inter-linkages and improved policies can also maximise benefits and mitigate risks. By addressing the complexities and grasping opportunities, Africa can transform extractivism into a catalyst for equitable and sustainable development.

Key words

Extractivism, Africa, development, inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Introduction

Extractivism is a complex and multifarious economic model characterised by the large-scale extraction of natural resources, primarily for export, with minimal processing. This concept emerged in the 1990s in Latin America to describe the appropriation of resources such as minerals, oil and timber, often in ways that had significant local socio-economic and environmental impacts. Africa's political economy is significantly shaped by extractivism, a model rooted in the legacy of colonialism that often leads to familiar economic and social inequalities. In the supposedly post-colonial era, African nations remain heavily dependent on the extraction of primary commodities for economic growth, often leading to the resource curse, where abundant resources correlate with poor economic outcomes and governance issues (Bruna, 2022; ROAPE, 2021).

In terms of current practices and challenges, Huber (2014), argues that many African economies' heavy reliance on the export of non-renewable resources has resulted in high levels of corruption, environmental degradation and social unrest, typified by countries such as Nigeria whose oil wealth benefits a small national elite while the majority remains impoverished. Characteristically, beneficiation (think wealth extraction) occurs outside the source country and the flow of resources is generally south to north, assisting in perpetuating the economic hegemony of the Global North.

The environmental impact of extractivism in developing economies is profound, often including permanent ecological degradation and displacement of communities. For instance, green extractivism in Mozambique illustrates how initiatives aimed at addressing climate change can exacerbate existing inequalities by prioritising international agendas over local needs (Bruna, 2022).

Assessing the socio-economic and environmental impacts of extractivism on the political economy of Africa requires an understanding of the historical context and evolution of extractivism, types and economic implications of extractive practices, their social impacts (including community resistance, gender considerations and environmental consequences) and the obstacles impeding sustainable alternatives for promoting local development, diversifying investment to include other sectors and exploiting continental opportunities.

The purpose of this article is to explore the complexities and opportunities related to extractivism in Africa. Issues that will be addressed include the historical context and evolution of extractivism, types and economic implications of extractive practices, social impacts, and gender considerations, environmental consequences and sustainable alternatives, and governance issues related to extractive industries. This article aims to share insights related to existing challenges and new opportunities commensurate with extractivism in the political economy of Africa. The discussion below is based on selected reviews of relevant secondary resources, including existing literature, government reports and media articles.

Defining and delimiting the meaning of African extractivism

The most obvious component of the meaning of extractivism is "resource extraction" which, according to Lowrey and Rogers (2022), entails the removal of vast quantities of raw materials, such as minerals, oil, gas and agricultural products, for export rather than local consumption or use. Additionally, Acosta (n.d.) highlights the significance of "minimal processing" of these resources before they are exported. Products or commodities are lower value-added (Chagnon *et al.*, 2022). Extractivism is based on a disproportionate relationship between economies in the Global South and the interests and priorities of the owners of global capital. This unequal relationship is undergirded by the commercialisation and exploitation of natural resources, knowledge systems and culture, the dispossession of the means of production and the independence of social domains.

Chagnon *et al.* (2022) also highlight the importance of "capital accumulation" in extractivism that often results in the centralisation of power among a few entities, typically alliances of multinational corporations and local elites. These unequal power relations often lead to the displacement of local communities, the destruction of local economies and the degradation of ecosystems (Lowrey & Rogers, 2022; Matthes & Crncic, 2012). Acosta (n.d.) and Riofrancos (2020) note that countries reliant on extractivist economies become dependent on global commodity markets and vulnerable to their volatility, which can lead to economic instability and limit broader economic development.

While extractivism also attracts foreign direct investment (FDI) which can boost local economies, it can also lead to exploitation and inequitable wealth distribution (Lowrey & Rogers, 2022), the displacement of indigenous populations, the disruption of traditional livelihoods, and conflicts over land rights and resource ownership (Lowrey & Rogers, 2022; Matthes & Crncic, 2012), a disproportionate impact on poor and marginalised communities of environmental degradation due to deforestation, water pollution (Chagnon *et al.*, 2022; Riofrancos, 2020) and governance challenges resulting from corruption, rent-seeking and weakened state institutions. African governments have frequently succumbed to neo-extractivism, the practice of prioritising short-term gains from resource extraction over long-term sustainable policies (Acosta, n.d.; Riofrancos, 2020). Unsurprisingly, there is growing resistance against extractive practices across Africa, driven by local communities advocating for their rights and environmental sustainability.

Brief overview of extractivism in Africa

Extractivism in Africa can be traced back to colonial times when European powers exploited the continent's natural resources, establishing a pattern of economic dependency that persists to this day (Bruna, 2022; Greco, 2021; Randriamaro, 2018). The colonial framework required to facilitate the extraction and export of minerals and agricultural products consisted of rudimentary infrastructure and technology. After independence, many African countries attempted to assert control over their resources through nationalisation and resource nationalism. However, these efforts were challenged by the lack of capital, technology, expertise and access to markets, leading to a return to foreign investment, foreign corporations and a reliance on primary commodity exports.

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More recently, the trend of neo-extractivism emerged, characterised by increased state involvement in resource extraction while still accommodating foreign capital. This approach aims to boost local content in extractive industries but often falls short of achieving significant structural transformation within economies (Greco, 2021). A new dimension of the globalised economy known as digital extractivism involves the exploitation of data and digital resources in ways reminiscent of traditional extractive practices (Kannan, 2022).

Extractivism trends in Africa

The literature highlights significant differences in regional resource endowments and extraction practices, with countries in Central, West and Southern Africa being particularly resource-rich. In Southern Africa, the focus is on mineral extraction, with a strong leaning towards state-led development. This approach has largely failed. Nationalisation of the copper industry in Zambia (1969-1990) largely failed due to a combination of economic mismanagement (Larmer, 2006; Libby & Woakes, 1980), external factors and shifts in policy focus. Mozambique has faced issues with foreign investment leading to land grabs and local disenfranchisement due to coal and gas extraction projects (Feijó & Orre, 2024). By contrast, the mining industry in South Africa is entirely privatised, notwithstanding past state interventions in steel and fuel production and power generation. The emphasis in West Africa is on oil and gas extraction through a mix of state-led and private-sector approaches (e.g. in Nigeria, Ghana). East Africa is dominated by oil, gas, gold and uranium extraction, with increased investment in state-led development and regional integration (e.g. in Kenya, Tanzania). Central Africa has vast untapped mineral reserves approximately \$30 trillion in value. Its mines are operated in a mix of state-led and private-sector approaches in a complex and politically volatile landscape, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. The DRC has struggled with resource-related conflicts where mining activities have led to environmental degradation and human rights abuses (ROAPE, 2021). The dominance of oil and gas resources prevails in North Africa (Tawfik, 2018) with a strong state-led approach and a focus on export-led growth.

Political economy framework

The political economy influences extractivism through the interaction of political institutions, economic policies and social structures. Key considerations include governance, regulatory frameworks, corruption, international trade relations and the role of multinational corporations. Political institutions, economic policies and social structures significantly influence extractivism in several ways. The colonial legacy has influenced political institutions in Africa, where a higher premium is placed on the interests of foreign powers, foreign investment and corporations than those of the local population (Fofack, 2019; Niang, 2019). Social structures (e.g. traditional leaders) are often co-opted to ensure a pliant workforce, marginalise communities, perpetuate power imbalances that hinder equitable resource distribution and exacerbate social inequalities.

African governments increasingly seek control over their natural resources, driven by a desire for greater economic independence and national benefit. This has led to resource nationalism, wherein states implement policies aimed at maximising local benefits from extraction activities. However, the effectiveness of these policies varies widely. While some countries have made strides in local ownership requirements and procurement policies, others struggle with governance issues that limit the potential benefits of extractivism to the broader society (Copely, 2017; Vandome & Dechambenoit, 2023). In addition, corruption pervades many African extractive sectors, often exacerbated by authoritarian regimes and warlords diverting funds that could otherwise support national development (ACHPR, 2022; Copley, 2017). Post-colonial elites in Africa are not merely co-opted by external interests – they actively participate in facilitating money laundering and illicit financial flows (Bryan & Hofmann, 2007). These elites often leverage their positions to siphon off resource revenues into foreign accounts or investments abroad, thereby perpetuating systems of inequality within their countries.

Understanding how extractivism links with Africa's political economy is a prerequisite for comprehensive policy reforms, which are a critical need. The desired outcomes of such reforms should include increased transparency, community engagement and a shift towards more sustainable and inclusive development models.

Key dimensions of African extractivism

The analysis of the literature highlighted several interconnected dimensions of how extractivism plays out in Africa's political economy. These are briefly discussed below.

Structural dependence on extractive industries

Many African economies' heavy reliance on primary commodities creates vulnerability to fluctuations in global commodity prices, which is exacerbated when these economies have failed to diversify and thus have little resilience to the effects



of declines in key commodity prices. While neo-extractivism reflects a shift towards resource nationalism, wherein governments attempt to reclaim control over natural resources, these policies lack the ambition of earlier socialist efforts to challenge multinational corporations. This results in a modest agenda focused on increasing local content, rather than achieving substantial national control over resources (Bruna, 2022; Greco, 2021). The structural dependence on extractive industries in Africa significantly influences the continent's development trajectory. While these industries should spur economic growth, they often fail to instigate broader economic benefits due to limited industrial processing and value addition (Nhabinde & Heshmati, 2020). Extractive industries frequently operate as enclaves, generating revenue without significantly contributing to local economies or contributing much to local enterprise development and job creation (Addison & Roe, 2024). There are also noteworthy perspectives of Ayuk and Klege (2017) who maintain that despite the potential benefits, many African nations experience what is known as the "resource curse", where abundant natural resources lead to economic instability, corruption and social inequality. Additionally, the reliance on extractive industries creates structural challenges for African economies.

Inadequacies of policy frameworks

Insufficient political backing and competing initiatives from global actors have encouraged a policy vacuum that undermines efforts to regulate extractive industries and promote sustainable and equitable mineral resource management. Robust accountability mechanisms are lacking resulting in existing frameworks frequently relying on voluntary compliance from corporations. Companies operate with minimal oversight, which encourages environmental degradation and social inequalities (Bruna, 2022). Policy reform must facilitate more openness and clarity, more community engagement and the adoption of more sustainable and inclusive development models that can put Africa on the path to economic equity with its trading partners.

A cursory examination of the continent's performance shows the short-sightedness of neo-extractivism. Sub-Saharan Africa sustains the European Union (EU) economy with a substantial proportion of its raw material requirements as well as gold, diamonds and many minerals yet African FDI in Europe is minuscule, due in no small part to domestic protectionism and control of development financing. This accords with the Global North's colonialist preference that Africa's role in the world economy should be confined to being a supplier of raw materials.

This distorted view of Africa's role in the global economy prevails because many of these Sub-Saharan African countries are convinced that without these exports they will sink even deeper into poverty, underdevelopment and instability. To exacerbate the situation, the Sub-Saharan countries do not have the bargaining power that members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) have with regard to oil. Therefore, the EU does not have the same obligation and need to elaborate a policy for Africa. The export of wealth from Africa, rather than its expansion within the continent, was quite apparent at the end of 1997 when nations of the Global North held 68% of the world stock of FDI, compared to Africa's 1.9%.

The tragic disregard of Africa's investment role will only end when the people of Africa embrace the conviction that they are not custodians of First World benevolence, but guardians of their own sustained development.

To find sustainable solutions for poverty, underdevelopment and marginalisation, Africa and the rest of the 'developing' world must move from neocolonial dependence on extractivism to trade with the global community based on value-added products processed from its abundant natural resources. In this regard, a policy environment must be created that allows: (i) the requisite economic measures and policies to be implemented to make domestic and foreign investment into the extractive sector of Africa's economy appealing; (ii) the manufacture and export of value-added products to the markets of high-income countries; and (iii) all products from this value chain to be globally competitive.

In 2006, after attending the inaugural summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (Focac), which marked a significant milestone in the Africa-China relationship, then South African President Thabo Mbeki highlighted the need for Africa to avoid repeating historical colonial patterns where it primarily exported raw materials while importing manufactured goods, frequently made with the same raw materials. Mbeki emphasised the importance of creating a more balanced relationship that would benefit African economies without falling into dependency (Mbeki, 2006; Shelton & Paruk, 2008).

Socio-economic implications for local communities

The benefits from resource extraction do not necessarily translate into improved living conditions for local communities or impact poverty, despite the wealth generated from extractivism (Bruna, 2022). Poverty and extractivism in Africa are deeply intertwined, with the continent's vast natural resources often failing to alleviate poverty for local populations. Instead, extractivism has frequently resulted in environmental degradation, social inequality and economic dependency. The extractivist model often leads to significant environmental degradation (Hamouchene, 2019). For example, large-scale extraction activities such as oil and gas extraction have caused acute ecological crises in North Africa, including soil degradation and water scarcity. These environmental issues exacerbate poverty among rural populations who rely on natural resources for their livelihoods. Even ostensibly environmentally responsible green extractivism, which purports to extract natural resources sustainably, reduce carbon emissions or conserve biodiversity, often results in significant socio-economic costs to local populations in real terms and can

increase poverty by prioritising international climate agendas over local needs (Ayelazuno, 2019; Bruna, 2022). Furthermore, the commodification of natural resources through extractivism reinforces neocolonial hierarchies, where local economies remain subordinate to global market demands (Acosta, n.d.).



Gender impacts of extractivism

According to Pereira and Tsikata (2021a), research gaps that need to be addressed include women's opposition to and African feminists' analyses of extractivism, and their recommendations of anti-capitalist alternatives. African women have mobilised against mining projects and oil extraction through grassroots organisations, protests and community education initiatives. They highlight the interconnectedness of gender, environment and economic justice, emphasising that extractivism not only threatens their livelihoods but also undermines their social structures and cultural identities (Barcia, 2017). Examining the feminist position on extractivism, Daskalaki and Fotaki (2023) note that feminists have used artistic expressions and community gatherings to reclaim space and assert their rights against extractive industries. This approach not only fosters solidarity among women but also challenges traditional notions of gender roles within these movements. To counteract the detrimental effects of extractivism, African feminists advocate stronger legal frameworks to protect women who oppose extractive industries from violence and repression (Barcia, 2017) and community-controlled resource management that emphasises local governance over natural resources (Pereira & Tsikata, 2021b).

In South Africa's mining history, the burden of the health and environmental externalities which impacted communities has often been carried disproportionately by women, and much of this continues today. Among others, Benya (2022) has argued that the impact of industrial mining is still gendered and racialised. This research confirmed that, although extractivism has

focused on the production of resources, it has neglected social production, with specific reference to the exclusion of women in mining.

The impact of technological advancement

Foreign technology companies are not only able to prevent the development of local technological ecosystems but use digital extractivism to extract vast amounts of data from users, without adequate compensation, in ways that mirror the exploitative practices of conventional resource extraction (Jung, 2023; Morozov, 2017.). Not only Western economies are implicated in these practices.¹ Chinese investors control approximately 70% of the DRC's mining sector, particularly in regions rich in copper and cobalt, such as Haut Katanga and Lualaba. This dominance has made the DRC's economy heavily dependent on Chinese extractivism and vulnerable to fluctuations in the Chinese economy (Kinch, 2020). The economic benefits from this mining largely accrue to Chinese companies while the DRC receives minimal returns in terms of infrastructure and royalties (Rakotoseheno, 2024).

Preference for foreign companies

The enduring influence of colonialism on political institutions and elites is evident in the preference given to foreign business interests over those of local companies. The extraction-oriented framework established by foreign powers in the colonial period fostered a dependency on foreign investment and expertise which persists today, as many African countries still rely heavily on multinational corporations to provide FDI and employment and favour them with incentives that are denied to domestic firms (Douglas & Davids, 2023). For instance, South Africa offers tax breaks and other incentives to attract foreign businesses.

Furthermore, many African countries increasingly prefer Chinese companies over their Western counterparts. In 2023, trade between China and Africa reached a record \$282 billion (Munyati, 2024). While Chinese investments bring opportunities, critics are concerned about the potential over-exploitation of resources and environmental degradation, fearing that, without proper oversight, these investments might exacerbate local inequalities (Zhang, 2024).

Economic, social and environmental impacts

FDI from extractivism has bolstered national economies and contributed to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth (Huber, 2014), but often fails to translate into local development due to structural and systemic challenges. Over-reliance on natural resource extraction can lead to negative economic outcomes, including stagnation in other sectors like manufacturing and agriculture (Nhabinde & Heshmati, 2020). The socio-economic and environmental impacts of extractivism on local communities are profound and multifaceted, including increasing displacement of people, corruption and socio-economic inequalities (Acosta, n.d.). Among the environmental impacts noted in the literature are mining and drilling damage to marine habitats and loss of biodiversity (Africa Wild, 2021); offshore oil extraction causing oil spills, harming marine life and ecosystems (Ukpene *et al.*, 2024); extractive fishing practices depleting fish populations (IUCN, 2017); and sand mining causing coastal erosion and threatening the livelihoods of coastal communities and ecosystems (World Bank, 2019).

More positively, green energy extraction practices and an increased focus on renewable energy sources encourage African governments and companies to increasingly invest in renewable solar, wind and hydroelectric power technologies to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. In addition, the renewable energy sector is poised to create numerous jobs and stimulate economic growth across Africa. For example, it is estimated that renewable energy development could contribute significantly to GDP and create hundreds of thousands of jobs by 2030 (Kestrel Wind, 2023). In the discourse on the green economy, it's important to note, as expressed by Van Staden (2024), that there are several challenges to effective climate collaboration, including differences in national interests, economic disparities and levels of commitment to climate action among countries. Van Staden advocates innovative, flexible approaches to climate collaboration that can accommodate diverse national circumstances and priorities and give agency to local actions and initiatives addressing climate change.

Contradictions

New forms of extractivism, like neo-extractivism and green extractivism, bear similar contradictions to their colonial predecessors. For example, green extractivism includes the extraction of minerals and metals for green technologies, such as lithium for batteries and materials for renewable energy infrastructure (Hotz, 2022). While marketed as part of a transition to a green economy, this form of green extractivism can perpetuate exploitation and environmental degradation. Bruna (2022) argues that its rise is heavily influenced by financialisation, where investments in green projects lead to increased capital accumulation at the expense of local communities. In Mozambique, for example, climate-smart projects have resulted in significant rural displacement without adequate compensation. Furthermore, the irony has not escaped scholars and activists that African resources are extracted and beneficiated in processes and products that contribute to global warming and climate change



consequences in Africa such as drought, flooding and desertification, for which the extractive economies refuse to acknowledge responsibility or any right to compensation.

Alternative models to conventional extractivism

Alternative models to conventional extractivism in Africa are emerging as responses to the limitations and negative impacts of extractive practices. These alternatives prioritise sustainability, social equity and environmental protection over profits, aiming to create a more equitable and resilient economic framework.

Sustainable mining-agriculture linkages

Extractive companies can support agricultural development in regions where they operate. By fostering connections between mining and agriculture, companies can enhance local economies by supporting farmer-based organisations and agricultural initiatives and generating employment opportunities beyond the mining sector (Chakanya *et al.*, 2016). The literature indicates that communities engaged in sustainable farming report higher local employment levels compared to those reliant on mining activities that often prioritise capital over labour. In areas dominated by extractivism, such as South Africa's coal belt, food security initiatives like organic vegetable farms have demonstrated the potential for self-sufficiency and improved nutritional outcomes. Renewable energy companies have encouraged the exploitation of renewable energy sources for agricultural activities rather than fossil fuels. Community-owned renewable energy projects will support agricultural productivity and reduce the carbon footprint of mining operations, aligning both with broader climate goals (Pier, 2023).

Feminist alternatives

Randriamaro (2018) has mooted alternative models emphasising a feminist perspective on social justice and gender equity. This approach critiques traditional extractivism for exacerbating inequalities and the hidden costs of extractivism that disproportionately affect women and vulnerable populations. Two promising, women-focused alternatives to conventional extractivism noted in the literature are the WoMin African Alliance, which works with local women in countries such as South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria to resist harmful mining practices and promote eco-feminist alternatives that prioritise community needs over corporate interests; and the community initiatives in Somkhele and Fuleni in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where women have not only organised against coal mining activities that threaten their water sources and agricultural land but have developed alternative livelihood strategies that focus on sustainable agriculture and food security (AWID, 2017).

Community-based resource management

Community-based resource management (CBRM) is an alternative model that prioritises sustainability and emphasises accountable local decision-making bodies that are representative of community interests and support sustainable use of natural resources to allow communities to manage and benefit from their resources. Community-based natural resource management aims to empower local communities by assigning them rights over natural resources such as water, forests and wildlife. This model promotes sustainable use practices to ensure that communities can derive long-term economic benefits from resource management (Roe, Nelson & Sandbrook, 2009).

Conclusion

While extractivism remains a dominant feature of many African economies, its historical roots and contemporary manifestations reveal a complex interplay between local agency, global capital interests and socio-environmental challenges. Extractivism presents opportunities for economic growth in Africa, but it also poses significant challenges related to social justice, environmental sustainability and governance. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing policies that balance resource extraction with the needs and rights of local communities. The emergence of green extractivism illustrates a complex correlation between economic development goals and environmental sustainability in Africa. While framed as part of a green economy transition, it often exacerbates existing inequalities and environmental challenges rather than resolving them. Addressing these contradictions requires robust policy frameworks that prioritise local rights and sustainable practices over mere capital accumulation.

As Africa continues to navigate the complexities of extractive industries, it is important to place a high premium on transparency, accountability and inclusive governance. By leveraging regional cooperation, innovative policies and global participation, Africa can unlock the opportunities presented by its natural resources and transform extractivism into a catalyst for sustainable and equitable development. Ultimately, the future of extractivism in Africa depends on striking a fine balance between economic growth, social and environmental stewardship, and technological advancement. By purging its extractive industries of destructive colonial legacies and exploring alternative models based on careful management and a commitment to responsible practices, Africa can harness its extractive sector to fuel a brighter future for generations to come.

The gaps in understanding how extractivism links with Africa's political economy highlight a critical need for comprehensive policy reforms. Addressing these gaps requires a broad approach that entails policy reforms, increased transparency, community engagement and a shift towards more sustainable and inclusive development models. Dealing with these oversights will not only contribute to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon but also foster sustainable development across the continent.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This is illustrated by the global supply chain of a cell phone as explained in Webb (2022). The material composition of a smartphone is: 25% silicon, 23% plastic, 20% iron, 14%, aluminium, 7% copper and 6% lead. The extractive side of the manufacturing process is from mines with poor environmental and safety records, and are linked to armed conflicts and next to no protection. Webb notes that there have been ongoing conflicts in the DRC, related to various minerals. Mining in the DRC is also characterised by labour rights violations such as child labour and forced labour as well as bribery and corruption at a governmental level. A standard smartphone consists of several components each with its own value chains under problematic conditions.

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