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1. Introduction

Caustic soda (sodium hydroxide) comes in various forms and is incredibly versatile. It can be a liquid, solid, or powder. It is odourless and tasteless, and transparent like water when liquid. In its different configurations it has numerous applications in our daily lives, from being a key ingredient of soap and detergents to manufacturing processes such as metal refining, textile production, and even food processing. In bauxite refineries, such as the Friguia complex in Fria, Guinea, caustic soda is used in an intermediate step of aluminium production, to separate alumina-bearing minerals from bauxite rocks. By contrast, when a caustic soda solution is mixed with oils, it

induces saponification, while it can help fix dyes and expedite their absorption when it meets fabrics. Not handling and storing it properly can, however, have disastrous consequences. Its ingestion by humans causes burn injuries in the oral cavity and stomach, inability to swallow, gastrointestinal perforations, and lifelong respiratory complications, particularly among children (Botwe et al., 2015; Lupa et al., 2009). 'The curse of caustic soda' (*Le fléau de la soude caustique)*, often used in reference to the injuries that it causes, is an important concern of women's promotion groups that depend heavily on its use for soap making and cloth dyeing activities. These groups, from the French *Groupements de Promotion Féminine*, are a popular arrangement across the country. They bring together self-employed women within the same community around shared activities to sustain their livelihoods and support one another.

In what follows, this (chemical) agent serves as an entry point to connect seemingly separate economies and explore activities and relations of social reproduction necessary for the maintenance of life (Katz, 2001), which have remained largely invisible in current debates on resource extractivism. How do women's promotion groups experience extractivism? What does it mean to use a social reproduction–centred approach to understand their experiences? To answer these questions, this paper examines the unique case of Fria in Guinea, a coastal country in West Africa, which hosts the refinery of one of the leading aluminium companies in the world, and the everyday experiences of women who are part of promotion groups around sites of extraction.

The analysis relies on 37 interviews with the members of groups of women soap makers and fabric dyers, soda vendors, health professionals, civil society representatives, civil servants, and government officials, carried out in August 2017 in Fria, Conakry and Mamou, as well as documentary evidence and follow-up research conducted remotely in 2021. The 2017 interviews were undertaken as a part of a larger study seeking to strengthen local capacity for the prevention and treatment of caustic injuries, including through the sensitisation activities of women's promotion groups.[1]

Inspired by anthropology scholarship in the science and technology tradition (e.g., Laet and Mol 2000), this chapter follows caustic soda to illuminate the realities of women's groups and the way they negotiate social reproduction vis-à-vis the extractivist logics of the bauxite industry. As argued by Appadurai, 'if from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (Appadurai, 1986, 5). This approach entails drawing on a notion of agency that is not solely centred on humans, but also on relations between animate and inanimate actors, and how these affect and are affected (Fox and Alldred, 2015). It requires considering the research itself as an assemblage, in which material objects, people and ideas exist not in their integrity but in light of the relations that they engender (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Thus, assemblages allow bridging 'micro' and 'macro' levels of analysis, for example by highlighting the physical, emotional and social effects of integration in the global bauxite industry across different scales. Viewed in this light, the oesophageal burns caused by caustic soda among children in Fria or the smuggling of this chemical out of the refinery by underpaid factory guards are no longer 'micro' events, but rather coexist alongside 'macro' extractivist dynamics of the Guinean state and of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of multinational bauxite corporations.

By bringing to light the gendered ways in which extractivism plays out across productive and reproductive realms, this chapter speaks to the recent literature in human geography on landscapes of extraction, intended as the material and social conditions by which 'life itself is produced' (Arboleda, 2020, 32). In particular, it seeks to challenge prevailing notions of extractivism narrowly defined in terms of the productive sphere, prompting the need for a renewed engagement with this term, centred around the notion of social reproduction, in order to make 'diverse economies', as Gibson-Graham puts it (2008), more credible as sites of enquiry and development policy.

The following section begins by reviewing key debates about extractivism and resource extraction from a gender perspective, building upon insights from recent feminist political economy and human geography scholarship that has recentred processes of capitalist development around social reproduction and diverse economies. Next, I present the study context by providing an overview of both bauxite mining in Guinea, and Fria more specifically, and women's promotion groups. In the analysis, I elaborate on the mutual constitution and tension between the economies of the bauxite industry and women's groups, connecting social reproductive and mining labour across the artificial dichotomies of household–market, production–social reproduction, and licit–illicit. Further, I interrogate the sustainability of corporate responsibility and state strategies seeking to practice social and environmental justice, discussing the extent to which these utilise women's groups to reproduce extractivist logics.

2. Extractivism: Bringing in Social Reproduction

Recently, scholars across different theoretical approaches and geographies have called for a broadening of the boundaries—both symbolic and territorial—of extractivism to include the sociotechnical apparatuses that sustain extractivism as a system (Arboleda, 2020). Especially across Latin America, there has been a proliferation of studies that have considerably expanded the concept of extractivism beyond the notion of exploitation of natural resources by corporate powers, to examine the role of financialisation, neo-liberal development strategies and dynamics of south–south cooperation in sustaining contemporary resource extraction (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018, 2019; Gago and Mezzadra, 2017).

As a term that relates to a history of colonial and neocolonial plunder and devastation, extractivism denotes a much broader and complex phenomenon than merely resource extraction. As Szeman and Wenzel suggest (2021, 12), it signifies 'a system or ideology, a representational and symbolic space linked to the use (and abuse) of nature-as-resource'. Alternatives for 'good coexistences' between people and environments have gained traction as ways of counteracting this system (Acosta, 2017, 3). This strand in the literature has argued for an expanded engagement with the extractive dimensions of capital across domains, such as technical and knowledge practices, and how these entail the construction of 'outsides that are already constructed as susceptible to appropriation by capital' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019, 190). The role of gender as a social construct that allows for the construction of such 'outsides' and how these, in turn, sustain extractivist dynamics have, however, been relatively under-theorised.

Increasingly, feminist studies of extractivism have illuminated the gendered nature of extractivist processes. Some scholars, for example, examine the history of women in

mining (Gier and Mercier, 2006), and women's resistance to mining (Lahiri-Dutt, 2011), such as the opposition of indigenous women's movements (Sempértegui, 2021). Others, by contrast, document the gender inequalities inherent to extractivism, specifically the exclusion of women from formal employment in large-scale mining companies, as well as the negative environmental and health impacts that mining activities entail for local communities (Abrahamsson et al., 2014; Haile, 2020). As demonstrated by these studies, employment in this sector is precarious and highly dependent on ownership structures, shifts in governance arrangements, and commodity prices (Haile, 2020). These have important consequences for how workers, families and communities organise their lives, including from a gender perspective.

Nevertheless, there has been only limited engagement so far with feminist scholarship that has rearticulated processes of capitalist development around the concepts of social reproduction and diverse economies. The former is defined as the continuum of waged and unwaged activities and relations, such as domestic labour and childcare, as well as informal labour and subsistence production, that sustain life and communities, and the creation of economic value under capitalism (Prügl, 2021; Mezzadri, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Federici, 2004; Katz, 2001). One notable exception is Benya (2015), who adopts a social reproduction lens to examine individual and collective struggles in the aftermath of the Marikana massacre in South Africa. In her analysis, she demonstrates that domestic work largely performed by women is affected by the temporal and spatial patterns of mine work and that social reproduction is a key terrain for resistance against impunity.

The latter concept, that of diverse economies, pushes social reproduction debates forward by moving beyond gendered dichotomies that frame activities of social reproduction in binary opposition to capitalist production. Gibson-Graham defines them as 'the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration beyond market, waged and capitalist forms of enterprise', including cooperatives, housework, and self-provisioning (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2008, 6). The women's promotion groups examined in this chapter fit well within this frame, in that they are based on relations of interdependence and mutual support, while sustaining well-being, livelihoods and communities.

Rethinking what extractivism means and does from the perspective of social reproduction and diverse economies necessitates moving beyond narrow accounts of what counts as labour and value producing under resource-based capitalist development. This issue has been a longstanding concern of feminist and critical scholars of capitalism. In 1990, feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe asked a still pertinent question for international politics—'Where are the women?'—highlighting the role of the gendered division of labour in sustaining economic systems and the subordinate role ascribed to women relative to men. Along these lines, feminist scholars have brought to light the role that households play in both sustaining the functioning of global markets and devaluing women's contributions, specifically through home-based production (Mies, 1982; Prügl, 1999). Further, they have highlighted that this process of devaluation is closely linked to colonial penetration and its underlying mechanisms of violent appropriation, both economic and ideological, whereby women 'are treated as if they were means of production of "natural resources" such as water and land' (Mies, 1982, 5). Thus, recentring extractivism around issues of social reproduction provides an

expanded horizon through which to examine the extractive dimensions of capital, and how these are organised along gender, racial, ethnic and class lines.

Arguably, both extractivism and the disenfranchisement of social reproductive activities and relations are inextricably linked to colonial and imperialist practices. Drawing from Maria Lugones's coloniality of gender and Ramón Grosfoguel's conceptualisation of extractivism, Rodriguez Castro (2021), for example, examines the varied forms of dispossession confronting *Campesinas* women in Colombia, and their struggles and resistance. In particular, she traces connections between territorial dispossession and 'epistemic dispossession through extraction of ideas and cultural practices', which rests upon the victimisation and objectification of *Campesinas* women, including in state development policy (Rodriguez Castro, 2021, 128). Indeed, this approach can be incorporated into social reproduction analyses of extractivism, to challenge the epistemic and ontological binaries that sustain extractivism as a system.

A social reproduction perspective contributes to deepening and expanding our understanding of extractivism. Firstly, it demonstrates that the systematic externalisation of costs of social reproduction to laborers, families and local communities is co-constitutive of extractivist processes (Mezzadri, 2021; Mezzadri, Newman and Stevano, 2021). Secondly, as an analytical lens it allows one to break the ontological binary that places such activities and relations in a separate and subordinate realm (Prügl, 2021). Thirdly, this approach brings attention to the role of the state in sustaining both extractivism and specific configurations of social reproduction. While feminist scholars have examined these dynamics particularly in relation to the retreat of

the neo-liberal welfare state in the global North (Arruzza, 2015; Bakker, 2007; Bakker and Gill, 2019), similar processes are at play in the global South as well, as demonstrated by the recent literature on extractivism as a state-led development strategy (Farthing and Fabricant, 2018). In fact, both states and corporations are deeply imbricated in social reproduction in and around sites of extraction, from the provision of electricity to water supplies and sewage systems, to the establishment of schools and hospitals in mining enclaves, as well as through the allocation of extractive revenues (Arellano-Yanguas and Acosta, 2014). By the same token, the social and ecological costs that extractivism creates for humans and environments pose significant challenges to the social reproduction of workers, families and communities around sites of extraction, though as Katz suggests (2001) these problems are seldom framed in these terms.

Lastly, focusing on diverse economies and their role in sustaining social reproduction around sites of extraction offers new opportunities to counter extractivist logics, bringing the sites where alternatives to capitalist modes of production can advance to the centre of the enquiry (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa, 1999). This effort not only has the potential to help us understand people's everyday lives more fully, it also draws attention to the windows of opportunity for solidarity, resilience and resistance that can emerge in these spaces. The need to recognise the full range of economic activities undertaken in and around sites of extraction also resonates with attempts to move beyond narrow understandings of extractive industries, for example to include illicit and hidden economies (Calvão, 2017; Moodie, 1980), not in binary opposition to formal extractive economies but as constitutive of them.

3. Bauxite Mining and Women's Promotion Groups in Guinea

Extractive industries occupy a central role in the Guinean economy. In 2016, the country was the world's third largest exporter of bauxite—which accounted for over 80 per cent of Guinean revenues from mining, for a total of about USD 280 million—and a leading exporter of other mineral commodities such as gold, diamonds, iron and nickel (EITI, 2018). According to estimates, the country's bauxite reserves are the largest in the world (Knierzinger, 2014). Its extraction goes back to the late 1950s and has been a point of continuity from Guinea's colonial past to dictatorship and regime longevity in the post-independence period, to the strong foreign corporate influence that continues today (Diallo, 2019).

In the 1950s, the French colonial administration first introduced plans to produce aluminium through the extraction and refining of bauxite and the building of the city of Fria in the highlands of western Guinea. These plans only came to fruition when Guinea declared independence in 1958 under the Sekou Touré regime, leading to the establishment of the first alumina refinery on the African continent (Bolay and Knierzinger, 2021). Since then, Fria, also called the Paris of Guinea for its street lighting and state-of-the-art infrastructure, has served as a model for the establishment of other major mining enclaves. Though the capital intensity of bauxite extraction and refining processes only creates limited direct employment opportunities, for an estimated 2 per cent of the entire population of Fria (Diallo, 2017), the industrial complex itself owns the city's electricity, water, and sewage systems, and is involved to a significant degree in the financing (or lack thereof) of public services and infrastructure, such as medical care, schools, and roads (Knierzinger, 2014).

In 2001, the bauxite complex started to be administered by the private Russian company RUSAL, currently UC RUSAL, which also owns the Compagnie des Bauxites de Kindia (CBK) in Middle Guinea and another mining complex in Boké, [2]and is among the three largest aluminium companies in the world (Prokofeva et al., 2020). Fria's bauxite complex was fully privatised five years later and is currently the only one in the country to include a refinery for the processing of bauxite into alumina. It is the country's second-largest bauxite mine after the Compagnie des Bauxites de Guinée (CBG) in Boké, which is controlled by Alcoa, Rio Tinto-Alcan and the Guinean government.

The recent history of the RUSAL bauxite complex can be summarised in three time periods: 1) the period from 2001, when the complex was privatised, to 2012, when the Friguia refinery was closed abruptly by RUSAL; 2) the period of RUSAL's closure, from 2012 to 2017, which caused a profound crisis of social reproduction, including exclusion from basic services such as access to water and electricity; and 3) from when the company resumed operations in 2018 to date, a period characterised by exacerbated environmental damage and the unsustainability of extractive operations.

The first period, from 2001 to April 2012, as documented by scholars and activists, is marked by a gradual deterioration of living standards in Fria and a decline in factory conditions, as well as worsening relations between expatriates employed in the bauxite complex and Fria's population (Knierzinger, 2018 Diallo, 2017). In the words of the activist Ibrahima Talibé Diallo, the takeover by the Russian company fundamentally

changed relations with the local population, further alienating the bauxite complex from the lives and livelihoods in its surroundings:

> They had heard that the French whites lived in the same habitat with the Guineans and shared their meals and that the Americans did almost the same. But they did not want to do that. Thus, they erected a cité right in city center that had privileged access to all the existing infrastructure and an extension of the initial cité. The principal characteristics of these two entities were the fact that they were closed (three meter walls with barbwire) and that they could only be entered by Russian personnel. (Correspondence with Ibrahima Talibé Diallo in Knierzinger, 2018, 146).

The second period covers the years from 2012 to 2017 and is marked by RUSAL's factory closure, which in turn engendered a profound humanitarian crisis in Fria (PROJEG, 2018). This not only caused adverse consequences for employees and subcontracted workers, it also jeopardised access to basic services such as electricity and water (Diallo, 2017).[3] During this period, the registration of women's promotion groups engaging in both artisanal business activities and agriculture intensified, while civil society organisations in Fria and abroad mobilised, calling for both immediate action and alternatives to reinvent the city (PROJEG, 2018).

In 2018, after long negotiations between RUSAL and the Guinean government, the refinery reopened. This more recent period, from the rehabilitation of Friguia to the present, marks another shift in Fria's extractivist landscape. Though alternatives to the refinery have lost salience according to civil society organisations (PROJEG, 2018), women's promotion groups have remained in the spotlight, becoming privileged beneficiaries of the CSR projects of mining corporations such as RUSAL, especially as demand for soap increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, for example, the Guinea Alumina Corporation (GAC) released a video on YouTube illustrating how the company supported local communities' efforts to cope with the COVID-19 crisis by purchasing soap from women's promotion groups (GAC, 2020), while news outlets reported that RUSAL provided direct financial support, for the purchase of inputs and raw materials, to about 30 women's promotion groups in the city and nearby villages (Bha, 2020).

Before exploring the role of women's groups in sustaining extractivist processes in Fria and beyond, however, some clarification of the functioning and origin of these groups is warranted. Women's promotion groups aim at bringing together self-employed women from the same village or community around shared activities that can sustain their livelihoods and provide mutual support. An important feature of these groups is that they are formed at the grassroots level and are part of a broader structure of local and national federations, headed by the Women's Promotion National Directorate (Direction Nationale de la Promotion Féminine, DNPF). The groups are generally composed of about 20 members, including an elected president and a treasurer, and engage in training activities, the sharing of resources and knowledge among members, and in joint childcare, production and financial arrangements.

Although there are no estimates of the number of women's promotion groups currently active in Guinea, they have been an integral part of the economic and social fabric since independence. Throughout Guinea's history, women have engaged in nationalist struggles and politics, advocating for gender equality in both public and domestic spheres and against colonialism (Steady, 2011). Under the socialist regime of Sékou Touré, the ruling *Parti Démocratique de Guinée* (PDG) established an extensive network of committees and local councils, with women's bureaus at the district, sub-prefecture,

and prefecture levels (Dessertine, 2019). These bureaus were crucial for the transmission of the party's messages to local communities, and for the mobilisation of political protests and the fostering of women's engagement in productive activities, especially in agriculture. While this system was abolished as the country embarked on the process of a gradual liberalisation and privatisation of the economy from the 1990s on, the organisation of women around groups engaging in business activities and agriculture continued to play an important role, and these groups were increasingly integrated into local development projects (Dessertine, 2019; Doumbouya, 2008; De Boodt and Cauberge, 1998). Nevertheless, the relations between these groups and extractive industries, specifically outside of formal wage relations with regard to mining, have been underexplored.

Taking the circulation of caustic soda as a heuristic tool, this chapter traces connections between the bauxite industry and the soap making and cloth dyeing activities of women's groups, making visible the mutually constitutive relations and tensions between these two seemingly separate economies. To do so, the remainder of the chapter explores the labour and negotiations that take place around sites of extraction, attending to how gender works to sustain extractivism as a system. The members of women's groups are primarily involved in social reproduction, yet they also perform 'productive' activities, sustaining the survival of their households and communities through their labour on a daily basis. As they use caustic soda within homes and workshops, oftentimes alongside domestic work, they contribute to creating diverse economies around sites of extraction, the logics of which transcend the extractivist dynamics of the bauxite industry.

4. 'D'où vient la soude ?'

The question 'Where does the soda come from?' (*D'où vient la soude ?*) enables us to trace unpredictable connections, including among the caustic soda, the members of promotion groups, villagers and their children, and health personnel treating oesophageal injuries caused by accidental ingestions, as well as guards surveilling the bauxite complex, and government officials regulating trade in chemicals in Conakry, Guinea's capital. In tracing caustic soda's circulation, this section starts by exploring how families and communities confront extractivism through activities that cross boundaries of paid and unpaid labour, the licit and illicit, relations of production, and social reproduction. It then shows the mutual constitution and tension between the diverse economies that soap makers and cloth dyers are part of around sites of extraction and the operations of extractive industries themselves. While women's groups sustain extraction and are also affected by it, they are at the same time a terrain for alternatives, where resilience, solidarity, and sociality can emerge.

Firstly, caustic soda *works* in different ways and is entangled in a myriad of worlds that transgress its ordinary industrial usage. Oumar, a civil servant in Fria who has retired from the bauxite complex, recalls the thefts of caustic soda between Conakry's port and the mine as follows:

> Oumar: The soda arrives at the port. Then the soda is stored on the train and taken to Fria. The moment the train leaves Conakry, there are thefts.
> Luisa: There are people who steal the caustic soda?

> Oumar: It's not official but that's how it is, from the port to the train, and even when the train is running, people steal it by putting it in cans. (Interview with civil servant in Fria, August 2017)

Other interviewees in different locations describe similar dynamics. For example, when explaining the frequency of accidental caustic soda ingestions among children, a health professional in Conakry explains the prevalence of such accidents in relation to bauxite mining, arguing that extraction has contributed to making this chemical substance more available in markets across mining towns. In his words:

> Most of them [the victims of accidental ingestions] come from the interior, especially where there are factories that mine bauxite or manufacture aluminium;[4] this is the case for Fria and the surrounding villages, the case for Kamsa and the surrounding villages, and in Conakry as well, because the train takes the soda in liquid form here to the interior, and people take advantage of this to take the soda and sell it at the market. (Interview with health professional in Conakry, August 2017)

But the thefts do not stop once the caustic soda enters the factory gates, as Oumar explains:

> Oumar: There are many entrances and exits. At the main entrance, there is a team that monitors. At the main exit, there is another team, and another in the warehouse where there is the aluminium. Everything is monitored by guards, who are paid to do this. They are underpaid; it is another company. There is a middleman who everyday recruits people to monitor... They are not paid like the employees.
> [...]
> Before, in 1975, there was a military surveillance service, which guarded the factory, about a hundred people, back then we did not steal; it was less compared to today, when there are at least 400–500 guards.
> Luisa: 400–500 guards?
> Oumar: Yes, more or less. Back then we were not even 100; there were thefts but not like the present.
> Luisa: So, as the number of guards increased, the thefts increased?
> Oumar: Yes, of course. Before there was another system: when a worker is caught stealing, he is automatically fired, he loses all his social rights, if caught *in flagrante* he automatically loses all social rights, that's it; at that time it was like that. Now, when we catch the guards; it is not like before. (Interview with civil servant in Fria, August 2017)

This suggests that the smuggling of caustic soda cannot be examined in isolation, but rather in relation to the mining complex's shift from public to private ownership, and the subcontracting of surveillance services to private guards who are paid daily and lack the social rights of permanent employees, as pointed out by Oumar.

While the privatisation of the bauxite complex and its takeover by RUSAL caused a profound deterioration in living standards for workers and their families and escalating tensions between the company and worker representatives, as documented by Knierzinger (2018) the company increasingly sought strategies to minimise costs by lowering wages and cut social benefits through the establishment of subcontracting firms. One of these, Senta, is responsible for the hiring and payment of the majority of the local population working in the bauxite complex, which allows RUSAL to circumvent its obligations to ensure accommodation and access to staple foods for subcontracted workers, while continuing to hire foreign employees directly and providing them with access to these very same goods and services (AMINES, 2021).

In some instances, it is not only the caustic soda itself, but also the large, empty containers used to carry it to the refinery that serve to negotiate conflictual relations with workers and their representatives. As a government official in Conakry states,

> Often, it was the union that took care of the collection of these empty containers and for the industrialist, well, he is going to use this to distribute expenses a little, deal with social issues, etc. If these are containers of rice, that's alright, but chemical products? We said, 'be careful, you are not accommodating the union, but incriminating it, because there are penalties for that'. These are the failures. Sometimes there is also complicity between the industrialists and the traders, and that's how the soda in full form is in the markets. (Interview with government official in Conakry, August 2017)

According to this interviewee, the transfer of empty caustic soda containers to the union for discharge and reuse represents a strategy, albeit short-lived, for appeasing the union and the workers it represents, but it also exposes the union to incrimination, as the reuse of chemical containers is a violation of the existing regulations. This measure also causes caustic soda contaminations, with harmful ecological and health consequences since these containers are then used for domestic purposes, such as the storing food, or are disposed of along with regular waste.

This excerpt also refers to complicity between industrialists and traders engaging in illicit activities, which contributed to making caustic soda in full form—a more aggressive agent for industrial use compared to other caustic soda agents—available in local markets, with women increasingly supplying it for soap making and cloth dyeing activities. The official continued, referring to caustic soda, 'It ends [up] in the hands of users who don't really know its potential dangers, who are therefore exposed to those dangers. Two groups are most affected: local dyers and soap makers. The risk is there but we have not evaluated it; but it's there'. (Interview with government official in Conakry, August 2017.)

Bauxite mines are not the sole providers of caustic soda. It is also imported in bulk by retailers in Conakry, who in turn supply vendors in the interior of the country. Since the closing of the refinery, many vendors interviewed resorted to this strategy, as illustrated by the following interview with a caustic soda vendor, Halima, and a member of one of the promotion groups, Marie, at the market in Fria:

> Luisa: So, where do you buy the soda?
> Halima: At the Madina market in Conakry; I buy the bags there and retail it here, so I can earn a little, one kg, half [...] Sometimes I hire a driver and we go there, I buy ten bags and when it's finished, I go back. If I buy ten bags, it lasts for two weeks.
> [...]
> Luisa: How come you decided to sell the soda?
> Halima: Before, when my husband was not dead, he did this job... He worked at the factory, that's where he let the soda come out.
> Luisa: He was taking the soda from the factory?
> Halima: Yes.
> Marie: Hmm, this isn't right—tsk tsk.
> Halima: It was the liquid, the liquid one. The powder comes from Conakry. When the factory was open, I used to sell that; now that the factory is closed, I go look for it in Conakry. (Interview with caustic soda vendor and group member in Fria, August 2017)

This conversation brings to light the relationality of the public and private around sites of extraction. The struggles confronting Halima, such as her husband's death and the new strategies she devised to sustain her livelihood, cannot be examined in isolation

but rather are entangled with the closure of the refinery. This interview also highlights the existing moral sanctions surrounding the smuggling of caustic soda, exemplified by Marie interrupting the conversation to express her disapproval. Through the circulations discussed in this section, caustic soda becomes visible as a boundary-crossing agent that bridges mutually constitutive licit and illicit, extractive and diverse economies. In the next section, I continue to unpack these relations of mutual constitution and tension, as the caustic soda moves into the hands of women soap makers and fabric dyers.

Revaluating Women's Promotion Groups in Times of Crisis

The experiences of women's promotion groups in Fria intertwine with the trajectory of the RUSAL bauxite complex. Understanding the struggles facing the women in these groups requires paying attention to RUSAL's operations and the abrupt closure of its refinery. At the same time, the operations of the bauxite complex cannot be fully grasped without first recognising the role of women's promotion groups in shouldering economic pressures times of crisis.

The women's promotion group in Fria was created only after the refinery was closed in 2012, though around half of the group's members already engaged in soap production and cloth dyeing activities prior to its formation, with one of the women there reporting to have started as early as 2001. Most of the members are married, have children, and recount that since the time when the group was formed their husbands have been unemployed due to the closure of the refinery, resulting in them being the sole or primary income earner in their household. In a context of widespread unemployment, frequent power cuts, and worsening economic conditions in Fria, joining a women's group provides an alternative for subsistence for many of the women. In the words of Fatou, 'In Guinea, especially in Fria, husbands do not work. We have children. What we make today is what we sell tomorrow, to earn money. Before, my husband worked in the factory' (interview with the member of a promotion group in Fria, August 2017). This excerpt demonstrates that women's activities within promotion groups have been indispensable for families around the bauxite complex, particularly when operations were halted.

In some instances, these activities created openings for recognition and support from husbands. As Kadiatou describes, 'It was a relief for my husband that I am part of this group, because when I became part of it he did not work'. Fatima, by contrast, explains that her husband was 'obliged' to accept her taking over a breadwinning role: 'He was obliged to accept this because he doesn't work. So, it's me who contributes to the household income'. Other women describe their husband's perceptions in more positive terms: 'My husband gives me advice; he is the one who motivates me not to leave the group. This group is really good', says Jeanne, while Hadia states, 'He's proud; he's happy' (interviews with members of the group in Fria, August 2017). Thus, group members' experiences are far from homogeneous; women do not talk about their position in terms of oppression, but rather highlight their own negotiations while confronting patriarchal structures and economic hardship.

Nevertheless, engagement in soap making and cloth dyeing activities did not translate into an equal redistribution of domestic and childcare responsibilities at home, but rather coexisted alongside this labour. As illustrated by the observation of an NGO

interviewee, women's engagement in economic activities is often seen as an extension of, rather than a break with, women's role as mothers and carers within their families: 'The factory [in Fria] closed four years ago, so people turned to soap making and dyeing. In Guinea, in a couple that does not work, the woman is the most involved because of the children' (interview with NGO representative in Conakry, August 2017). This resonates with the gender dynamics documented by Evans (2016) for the case of Zambia's Copperbelt, where financial and economic displacements caused by extractive corporate practices led women to increasingly engage in breadwinning roles, while being accompanied by an asymmetric distribution of domestic and childcare work.

The coexistence of social reproductive work, especially childcare, with productive activities such as soap making and fabric dyeing is apparent when discussing accidental caustic soda ingestions by children with the women. As some of the groups' members describe, accidents involving children are frequent among women producers particularly when they engage in these activities on their own, as this often involves producing at home, storing chemicals in the kitchen, using kitchen utensils, and looking after children while working. Being part of a group, as is explained by some of the members, provides opportunities to move production activities to different and more secure places, such as a shed built for the purpose or a workshop at the Centre for Women's Empowerment (Centre d'Autonomisation des Femmes) (CAF). It also allows the women to share know-how on how to protect themselves and others from chemical burns and share childcare responsibilities, whereby one member looks after the children while the others process the soap and fabrics.

Notably, participation in the promotion groups creates a sense of solidarity among the women, as Binta explains:

> Before I used to work alone; now we are together. We help each other out. Before, if I had a problem, I was alone, but now, if I have a problem, all the women stand up. If one of us has a problem, the others stand up [...] My son has a heart disease, he is in Conakry; when I need, we all provide a contribution; there is a girl who got married, we did her dowry. The others, all stayed by my side. (Interview with group member in Fria, August 2017)

This is not confined to the group interviewed in Fria, but resonates with the experiences of women in different regions of Guinea. In the words of Salimatou, the member of a promotion group in Mamou: 'Before I worked alone. One alone is nothing!' (interview with a member of the group in Mamou, August 2017). In Fria, however, engagement in the promotion group intertwines with the refinery's closure and the economic hardship that unfolded as a result of this rupture. Fatoumata, for example, describes the social and economic benefits of joining the group and juxtaposes them to the experiences of others who were 'immobilised' by the crisis:

> There have been many positive changes in my social life since I joined this group. I am doing well; we hang out with each other. Also economically, the caustic soda is very expensive. [...] Since the factory closed, our means have changed, because the husbands don't work. There are some people who resorted to other income generating activities, but others had nothing to put on their plates; they spent all their money and were immobilised. (Interview with group member in Fria, August 2017)

Several members interviewed highlighted the benefits of working in a group relative to working alone, not only for themselves but also for their community. Aissata, for example, sees her participation in the group as an important contribution to the health of her neighbourhood:

> I benefited a lot from this [group] personally, because back then I did not know what precautions to take when a child swallows the soda, what are the first precautions to take before the child is treated at the hospital. So, we became aware of this. As soon as a child drinks it, we know what to do. Then my own protection. Also, what is important is that through me, all the neighbourhood receives the same information concerning the soda. (Interview with group member in Fria, August 2017)

In sum, following caustic soda from the port to the bauxite complex to promotion groups' workshops reveals the mutual constitution and tension between two seemingly separate economies, that of the refinery and that of the promotion groups within which women subsidise extractive practices, negotiate, and survive. Though breadwinning roles tend to be justified as an extension of family responsibilities and are accompanied by an unequal distribution of domestic and childcare work, engaging in these groups provides windows of opportunity for resilience, sociality, and solidarity in a time of crisis such as that caused by RUSAL's five-year closure.

5. 'Notre ville est née de l'usine, et non l'inverse'

'Our city was born from the factory, and not the other way around' ('*Notre ville est née de l'usine, et non l'inverse*') is a quote from a resident of Fria cited in a report by PROJEG, a civil society consortium composed of 150 organisations including unions, women's associations and international NGOs (PROJEG, 2018, 4). It is telling with regard to the extent to which social reproduction in Fria is dependent on its mother mine on a daily and structural basis and at the same time is in tension with it. In the remainder of this chapter, I reflect on the sustainability of social reproduction in Fria and how this has been disenfranchised since the reopening of the refinery in 2018.

Firstly, as discussed in the previous section, women's promotion groups have increasingly become target beneficiaries of CSR projects initiated by RUSAL and other bauxite companies around sites of extraction. As stated in RUSAL's sustainability strategy, these measures are seen both as a way to take into account the 'interests of the local population' (RUSAL, 2021, 88) and as an investment in the 'creation of long-term business value' (RUSAL, 2021, 189). Nevertheless, by targeting these groups as beneficiaries, corporate discourses and practices inherently place women's groups in a subaltern position. This further marginalises women's activities, neglecting the crucial role that they have played in helping households survive the crisis since 2012.

While corporate responsibility provides a 'social license to operate' and represents the recognition of marginalised people and communities by corporate power (Syn, 2014), it ultimately legitimises extractive activities, providing an extension of extractive practices, whereby women are exploited as the 'last colony' of extractivism.

Furthermore, although bauxite corporations such as RUSAL increasingly target women's promotion groups as beneficiaries of CSR projects, several of these groups' members do not view these economies as a viable livelihood strategy for them in the longer term and would rather engage in a different activity. As Mariam states:

> We don't have the means [...] what we earn with the soda is little. The bag [of caustic soda] outside there, that's 280,000 francs–300,000 francs; the oil there, that's 175,000 by the litre. When you sum this all up, there's little that's left [...] if we had the means, we could start another activity that could help us earn more than the soap. That's it; if we can get the money, we will call everyone in the group, we will

> sit together and discuss what to do. (Interview with group member in Fria, August 2017)

This excerpt calls into question the sustainability of soap making and dyeing economies, suggesting that interventions by RUSAL to support the local community by fostering alternative economic activities are inadequate, but it also brings to light the importance of the collective ('sitting together') when it comes to making decisions for the future.

In addition, state regulation of the trade in chemicals risks complicating access to caustic soda, potentially displacing soap making and dyeing activities. In fact, since 2012 the Guinean state—particularly the Ministry of the Environment—has revamped its efforts to regulate chemical substances. The National Plan of Chemical Products 2012–2020, for example, classifies caustic soda as a chemical with a high priority and degree of concern on a national scale, though it also recognises the existing difficulties in tracking and reducing negative impacts (République de Guinée, 2011, 20). The view that such a chemical agent should be regulated despite potential repercussions for women's livelihoods was prevalent during interviews with government officials, as expressed by one: 'Allowing someone to start an activity that allows them to generate resources is good, but chemicals must be an exception' (interview with government official in Conakry, August 2017). This begs the question of whether diverse economies and more sustainable configurations of social reproduction can exist around sites of extraction and, if so, of what kind. In other words, can a city that was born out of the mine really be transformed? Some of the women interviewed demonstrate that it can, but not within the existing extractivist paradigm.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the mutual constitution and tension between two seemingly separate economies, interrogating what it means to take a social reproduction–centred approach to extractivism. It has taken caustic soda as an entry point to illuminate the existing entanglements between bauxite mining and its extractivist logic, and women's groups, animated by a sense of community and solidarity. In so doing, it has traced connections between the activities of social reproduction performed by women's groups around sites of extraction and the extractive operations of the bauxite industry. In Fria, where social reproduction depends on extractivism on both a daily and a structural basis for access to basic services and livelihoods or lack thereof, material and social experiences of extractivism are particularly extreme and harmful, yet women's promotion groups are not an oppressed community. On the contrary, the relationship between women's activities and the bauxite industry as discussed in this chapter draws attention to the existing subsidy that women provide to extractive operations, as well as to the gendered contours of resilience and solidarity around sites of extraction.

The case of Fria is hardly generalisable as the city hosts the first and only currently operating bauxite refinery in the African continent, but this in itself is telling of the current mode of extraction in the continent and beyond. Crucially, in their specificity and locality, the struggles, negotiations, and openings for solidarity narrated in this chapter have important implications for how we study extractivism, as well as for development policy. The members of the women's group interviewed point to several avenues that have wider relevance. The first is to take social reproduction and diverse

economies seriously, as sites where the 'immobility' caused by extractive industries can be actively and discursively resisted; the second is that as long as extractivism remains as a system, diverse economies that contribute to sustaining life and well-being will continue be marginalised; the third, that we need collective and participatory decision-making to move forward. They also prompt us to question whether different modes of extractivism are possible within the current structures of production and social reproduction, disenfranchisement, and devaluation, and, if not, to take urgent action.

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NOTES

1. The interviews were conducted in French with some exceptions. In this latter case, they were conducted with the aid of simultaneous translation from Pulaar and Susu. All have been subsequently translated into English by the author for the purpose of this paper. The names of the interviewees have been modified for confidentiality reasons.

2. Boké is a region that has experienced a significant extractivist boom since 2016, fuelled by increasing foreign direct investment from China and the UAE (for an overview, see Widder et al., 2019).

3. Though official sources attribute the closure to conflictual relations with the local union, culminating in a large-scale strike and lockout, several activists contend that this merely served as a pretext for RUSAL to mitigate financial risks in a context of deteriorating aluminium prices and falling productivity due to declining technical conditions at the refinery (PROJEG, 2018; Knierzinger, 2018).

4. Here and in similar instances, interviewees refer to aluminium as a shorthand for alumina (fr: alumine) or aluminium oxide, and not to pure aluminium. I retain the term as originally conveyed by my interlocutors.

ABSTRACTS

This chapter examines the entanglements between two seemingly separate economies, women’s promotion groups—grassroots arrangements bringing together self-employed women around shared activities to sustain their livelihoods—and bauxite refining. It starts by following the circulation of caustic soda, a chemical agent harmful to humans and used in soap making, fabric dyeing and aluminium production from bauxite, in and around the refinery of one of the leading aluminium companies in the world. The main argument is that diverse economies such as these women’s groups are significantly shaped by and sustain the bauxite industry, with which they are in mutual constitution and tension. Drawing on original interviews with members of these groups, civil society, and government representatives in Guinea, the analysis demonstrates that the bauxite industry directly sustains women’s promotion groups, both through the smuggling of caustic soda by factory guards and through corporate social responsibility initiatives. In turn, the groups subsidise extractive operations in times of crisis and factory closure, with many women becoming the sole income earners in their families and bearing the double burden of production and social reproduction. At the same time, women’s groups elude extractivist logics; they represent a terrain where resilience, solidarity, and sociality can emerge. Attending more closely to how they are entangled with extractivism is important, not only to make them more visible as sites of enquiry and development policy, but also to advance alternatives to extractivism that are more just and sustainable.

Ce chapitre examine l'enchevêtrement de deux économies apparemment distinctes, les groupements de promotion féminine – qui réunissent des femmes travailleuses indépendantes autour d'activités partagées afin de soutenir leurs activités de subsistances – et le raffinage de la bauxite. Le texte commence par décrire la circulation de la soude caustique, un agent chimique nocif pour l'humain et utilisé dans la fabrication du savon, la teinture des tissus et la production d'aluminium à partir de la bauxite, dans et autour de la raffinerie de l'une des principales sociétés d'aluminium au monde. L'argument principal est que les activités économiques diverses telles que celles de ces groupements de femmes sont façonnées de manière significative par l'industrie de la bauxite, avec laquelle elles sont en constitution et en tension mutuelles, et qu'elles soutiennent. S'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des membres de ces groupements, des représentants de la société civile et du gouvernement en Guinée, l'analyse démontre que l'industrie de la bauxite soutient directement les groupements de femmes, tant par la contrebande de soude caustique par les gardien-ne-s d'usine que par les initiatives de responsabilité sociale des entreprises. À leur tour, les groupements soutiennent les opérations extractives en temps de crise et de fermeture d'usine, de nombreuses femmes devenant les seules sources de revenus de leur famille et supportant la double charge de la production et du travail reproductif. En même temps, les groupements échappent aux logiques extractivistes; se dégage un terrain où la résilience, la solidarité et la socialité peuvent émerger. Il est important de s'intéresser de plus près à la manière dont les groupements de femmes sont enchevêtrés dans l'extractivisme, non seulement pour les rendre plus visibles en tant qu’objet d'enquête et de politique de développement, mais aussi pour proposer des alternatives à l'extractivisme qui soient plus justes et durables.

Este capítulo examina los enredos entre dos economías aparentemente separadas, los grupos de promoción de la mujer - organizaciones de base que reúnen a mujeres trabajadoras autónomas en torno de actividades compartidas para mantener sus medios de vida- y la refinería de bauxita.

Comienza siguiendo la circulación de sosa cáustica, un agente químico nocivo para el ser humano y utilizado en la fabricación de jabón, el teñido de telas y la producción de aluminio a partir de la bauxita, en la refinería de una de las principales empresas de aluminio del mundo y sus alrededores. El argumento principal es que economías diversas como las de estos grupos de mujeres están significativamente conformadas por la industria de la bauxita y la sostienen, industria esa con la que están en mutua constitución y tensión. A partir de entrevistas originales con miembros de estos grupos, la sociedad civil y representantes del gobierno de Guinea, el análisis demuestra que la industria de la bauxita sostiene directamente a los grupos de promoción de la mujer, tanto mediante el contrabando de sosa cáustica por parte de los guardias de las fábricas como a través de iniciativas de responsabilidad social de las empresas. A su vez, los grupos subvencionan las operaciones extractivas en tiempos de crisis y cierre de fábricas, con lo que muchas mujeres se convierten en las únicas generadoras de ingresos de sus familias y soportan la doble carga de la producción y el trabajo reproductivo. Al mismo tiempo, los grupos de mujeres eluden las lógicas extractivistas; representan un terreno en el que pueden surgir la resiliencia, la solidaridad y la socialidad. Es importante prestar más atención a su relación con el extractivismo, no sólo para hacerlos más visibles como lugares de investigación y políticas de desarrollo, sino también para promover alternativas al extractivismo que sean más justas y sostenibles.

INDEX

Geographical index: Guinea
Keywords: extractivism, bauxite industry, social reproduction, feminism, diverse economies, women’s promotion groups, civil society, alternative development policies, gender

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Luisa Lupo is a doctoral researcher in International Relations/Political Science and a researcher at the Gender Centre for the project Gendering Survival from the Margins at the Geneva Graduate Institute (Switzerland). Her PhD dissertation examines the relations of production and social reproduction that constitute the economy in which we labour and live, through an on-the-ground study of work and daily life at the intersection of cotton agriculture and apparel in Turkey. Her research interests include issues related to gender, social reproduction and the everyday lives of households, as well as rights and contestations in global supply chains and production networks.