
The right to ghost towns? Towards a critical geography of mine closure in West Africa

Johannes Knierzinger*¹

¹Institut de Recherche pour le Développement – UMR PRODIG – France

Résumé

Mine closure has become an increasingly important issue since the end of the mining boom in the aftermath of the subprime crisis. All over the world, companies felt forced to either reduce production and personnel or to close mines completely. To this economic pressure adds the fact that at least 25 major mines in the Global South were already scheduled for closure before the mining boom started in the early 2000s. Whereas the mining boom of the 2000s extended the life span of many of these mines, the economic crisis that followed shortly thereafter brought to an end these ‘methuselahs’ as well as a number of mines that seemed perfectly profitable before the cooling of the world economy. In particular in extraverted resource rich countries with weak governmental institutions, this led to multiple crises due to the stop of provisions with potable water and electricity, the collapse of local and regional health systems, sustained environmental contamination, high unemployment rates and the sharp decline of (local) governmental income.

There is a broad consensus about the fact that many of these negative consequences of mine closure can only be avoided by differently planning and constructing mining towns from the start. This involves the establishment of closure funds, the stimulation of diversification as well as infrastructural considerations.[1] However, during and after mine closure, such technical considerations become highly contested political issues about the control and the future of these (post-)extractive spaces which have not yet received substantive scholarly consideration. I will attempt to enrich the resulting debates with the concept of ‘shrinking cities’[2] and recent discussions about the ‘right to the city’.[3] Empirical examples will draw on research in Obuasi (Ghana) in 2017 and Fria (Guinea) in 2012, 2014 and 2017, consisting of about 50 semi-structured stakeholder interviews.

Lawrence, D. (2006) ‘Optimisation of the Mine Closure Process’, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 14: 285–98.

Martinez-Fernandez, C., C.-T. Wu, L. K. Schatz, N. Tiara and J. G. Vargas-Hernandez (2012b) ‘The Shrinking Mining City. Urban Dynamics and Contested Territory’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36 (2): 245–60.

Harvey, D. (2008) ‘The Right to the City’, *New Left Review* 53: 23–40.

Mots-Clés: Mines, villes minières, villes en décroissance, le droit a la ville, Guinée, Ghana

*Intervenant