

Alexandra Sicotte-Lévesque
Global Youth Fellowship
Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation

When Silence is Golden

A. Policy of investigation

Most Canadians' pension plans are being invested on shares of Canadian mining companies whose conduct in developing countries is unmonitored. For instance, Ghana (West Africa) is the host to more than 100 mining sites owned by Canadian corporations. The Canadian government has been one of the strongest advocates within the G8 for the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has put Ghana on its priority list for the past five years. However, according to local civil society, many Canadian gold mining operations in Ghana result in human rights violations within communities. To what extent, are Canadian trade and aid policies coherent with Canada's proclaimed commitment to promoting democratic governance and human rights in Africa? What are Canada and Ghana's responsibilities towards communities affected by mining?

B. Activities conducted

The main activity of this fellowship has been the production of a 52-minute documentary film, which is used as a tool to promote policy change.

Synopsis

When Silence is Golden follows the film's director in her quest to lift the silence on the gold mining activities of a Canadian mining company near a community in Western Ghana. Through her journey, we meet the inhabitants of this village who, despite efforts by the government to silence them, cannot hide their anger and are eager to express their grievances. In seeking to explain the complex situation in both towns, the film comes face to face with the human rights implications of gold mining operations in Africa—intimidation by soldiers policing the towns to suppress growing tensions, severe contamination of water sources and the possible resettlement of these communities. A looming social conflict within one of the communities is also exposed, where conflicting interests clash because of the presence of the mining company. This is a film about the struggles of ordinary people who want their voices to be heard; a portrait of a battle that many may consider as already lost.

Through the characters' plight, larger questions are reflected upon. 2007 is a crucial year: Ghana celebrates its 50th anniversary of independence, a historical moment for Africa, symbolizing 50 years of "freedom"—but for whom? On the eve of 2007, The Governor General of Canada makes an official visit to Ghana, stressing Canada's important relationship to this West African country. In the meantime, Canada solidifies its commitment in development aid to the West African country while dismissing the plight caused by Canadian mining activities. Moreover, Canadians' pension plans are being invested on the Toronto Stock Exchange through, among others, shares of Canadian mining companies operating in Ghana. The film travels between Canada and Ghana, and questions to what extent Canadian trade and aid policies are coherent with Canada's proclaimed commitment to promoting democratic governance and human rights in Africa--what are Canada and Ghana's responsibilities towards communities affected by Canadian mining interests?

Activities related to the film include:

- Production of a 20-minute version of the above documentary for international television (Al Jazeera)
- Secured additional funding from the Canadian Independent Film & Video Fund (CIFVF) and ARTICLE 19 for post-production.
- Launch of a website to showcase the film, its related activities and policy issues (www.when-silence-is-golden.org)
- Participation in a CBC news report featuring one of the filming trips to Ghana. (by video-journalist Lyndsay Duncombe)
- Film used by Amnesty International (Francophone Branch) for a campaign on Canadian extractive industries and human rights (throughout Québec)
- Film used for *Journées québécoises de la solidarité internationale*, themed on Canadian extractive industries (throughout Québec)
- Film screenings to be held across Canada involving policymakers when possible (Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Vancouver)
- Presentation at the National Roundtables on Corporate Social Responsibility and Canadian Extractive Industries in Developing Countries. (Toronto)

C. Summary of key findings/learnings

This fellowship has been a personal journey as much as a creative and intellectual process. The following is a summary of the policy findings resulting from the production of the film:

- Although many initiatives have been taken by NGOs and different mechanisms within government institutions (Foreign Affairs), Canada

has yet to implement concrete measures to ensure that Canadian mining corporations in developing countries act responsibly.

- The Canadian government needs to step up to its international obligations as per UN conventions, treaties and declarations.
- Lack of access to information within local communities (about their rights, government policies and activities of mining companies) is one of the major causes of most problems relating to the extraction of gold in Ghana.
- Foreign interests in developing countries can create social tensions within local communities—western concepts of corporate social responsibility may cause more harm than good.
- Local governments need to be empowered to negotiate with mining companies in a way that is beneficial to its economy and its local population.

D. Possible follow-ups

This is an ongoing project and although the duration of the Global Youth Fellowship is of one year, I foresee many activities to take place within the next few years. I hope that this documentary will become a tool to vehicle ideas and create discussion on this important topic. Thanks to an agreement with a distributor (CinéFête) the film will be distributed for the next 5 years within schools, universities, libraries, community associations and non-governmental organisations in Canada and worldwide. The film will also be sent to a variety of festivals in Canada, the US, Mexico and Europe. I hope to participate as much as possible to national debates on the issue, through the film or other means. This film has enabled me to explore the different realms of documentary filmmaking, especially in terms of policy change, and I hope to take further this unique opportunity I was given.