

# ‘White gold’, distress and anger

Big salt mining companies mostly multinationals have overrun the Keta Lagoon Basin, in South Eastern Ghana, in search of ‘white gold’, driving the artisanal and small scale traditional salt miners out of their livelihoods, communal heritage and resource, the lagoon, where they fish and mine salt, writes **\*Cornelius Adedze**.



Women at their salt works

Yawovi, looks forlorn and dejected as she recounts the tragedy that has befallen her, her family and the rural community that for centuries have lived on the banks of the Keta Lagoon. The childhood and adult joy and satisfaction of fishing in the lagoon during the rainy season and mining salt during the dry season is gone.

“My father, my mother and my grandfather, my grandmother before them, all earned their keep by fishing in these waters and mining salt when the waters run dry. I continued the tradition. We woke up one day and saw strangers with all kinds of machines on our land and water. We accosted them and they said government had given them the source of our livelihood”.

Next thing they knew. They had become trespassers in a communal resource

and heritage they had called theirs for centuries. No fishing, no salt mining.

Since 2011, 20,000 acres around the Keta Lagoon have been given out as concession to three large scale salt companies, leaving the local artisanal and small scale miners in the lurch. Seven more companies have applied to be granted concessions in the same area. So far communities like Adina, Kpedzakope, Task Corner, Sonuto, Dogbekope and Blekusu among others all in the Ketu South Municipality of the Volta Region, with populations in the tens of thousands are bearing the brunt of the takeover of their communal resource which has cost them their livelihoods.

Attempts by the communities to regain their ‘God-given resource’, has led to demonstrations and clashes between the communities and security agencies

resulting in some fatalities, arrests, court cases and continuous intimidation by the security forces.

A recent national forum organized by Third World Network-Africa, on artisanal and small scale gold and salt mining, brought together communities, civil society groups, artisanal and small scale miners from across the country, as well as policy makers. An official from Ghana’s Mineral Commission, one of the agencies responsible for giving out concessions stated to the ‘disbelief’ and chagrin of the artisanal and small scale miners that they are, ‘operating illegally’ as small scale salt miners and needed licence from the Minerals Commission to carry out their work, in the absence of which they can be arrested.

“The lagoons do not belong to the communities but the state and so like all mineral resources that belong to the state it can do with it as it deems fit without let or hindrance by communities” He continued. “To be recognized as artisanal and small scale salt miners you need to be granted licence by the Minerals Commission, without that you are operating illegally.”

“We are ready to die for our birthright. They can’t take what we were bequeathed by our ancestors and give it to foreigners. Are we not citizens of Ghana? Don’t we deserve the fruits of our inheritance? The government cannot take food from the mouths of its citizens and give it to foreigners. If they can’t provide us with jobs must they take away our own jobs?” Another affected community member wailed.

The licencing procedure cumbersome as it is with applications to local

authorities all the way to the national offices is also expensive. The equivalent of \$200 is required to apply only to the Minerals Commission in Accra, the capital, and there are other charges by such agencies as the Environmental Protection Agency among others.

As the arguments drag on back and forth on the dispossession, there are complaints of pollution of the environment by the two companies that are already operating in the area. Seven Seas Salt Company Ltd, operating in the Adina, Kpedzakope, Sonuto and Dogbekope areas (with close to 10,000 acres) has been accused by the communities of being responsible for the drying up of wells, dying coconut trees and a general drastic change in the vegetation of the area as instead of using sea water to produce salt it is drawing underground water thus depleting water supply. The company admits it was supposed to use sea water according to the licence it was granted but is currently using underground water for its operations. It however, insists, studies it commissioned disprove the claim by the communities.

“There is nothing scientific about the claims of underground water depletion due to our operations. We commissioned a study and it doesn't point to our operations being responsible. The area normally undergoes this cyclic water shortages so that could be it. More so we draw our water from a different aquifer as opposed to where the communities draw theirs so there is no way according to the findings of our consultants, that our operations will result in the drying up of their wells and dying coconut trees.” Adams Mensah, public relations officer of Seven Seas Salt, argued.

Allegations of poor management of waste from its operations have also come up. Solar salt technologist, Stephen Quaye, questions the waste management plan of Seven Seas as without a good and sustainable one waste resulting from its operations could cause irreparable environmental pollution and damage with long term impact on the ecology of the area.

“I don't know why, a designated Ramsar Site with a fragile ecology that needs protection ends up being parceled

out as a large scale salt mining concession. Underground brine is rich in magnesium and so what happens to the remnants after sodium chloride (common salt) is extracted?”, Quaye wondered in a recent interview.

Upstream from Seven Seas, is Diamond Solar Salt Ltd, a 1,000 acre facility, accused of dumping its waste into a fresh water pond that shares a boundary with Afiadenyigba Senior High School. Concerns are that the highly polluted water is causing damage to the school buildings and killing vegetation in the area especially when the pond overflows. Diamond Salt sources deny channeling their waste into the fresh water pond claiming they recycle their water so could not be responsible for that.

To the complaints of loss of livelihood and increase in unemployment in an already poverty-stricken area, the companies point to job opportunities created through their operations. Seven Seas says at peak it employs close to 500 people (this includes casuals) and Diamond, 100. Locals scoff at these numbers as a typical artisanal and small salt mining operation in the various communities dotted around the Keta Lagoon Basin involves thousands of people not mere hundreds. Minimum wages in both companies are a mere \$2 a day, just enough to meet the statutory minimum wage requirements.

“I am here just because I have nothing else to fall on. As our people say, looking somewhere is better than just staring into the skies. Soon as I get something better, I'll leave this hell-hole. It's as if we are not human.”, one worker revealed.

Working conditions are even worse. No protective wear or little of it for most of the workers. No gloves. No heat protective wear as they are drenched in sweat in the factory operating the machines, packaging the salt, carrying them into warehouses.

For people who, in a much more friendly and environmentally accommodating working space, made \$10-\$20 minimum a day from their own salt-mining operations, \$2 a day in someone's employ is demeaning and Yaovi, did not hide that.

“I could make sometimes more than

\$50 a day mining salt myself. Why will I go and slave for someone and get \$2? Is it a curse? Is this the kind of job they promised us?”, Yawovi moaned.

“Our people are just refusing to move on. Technology has bypassed them. They can't continue to mine salt the old way, do things the old way and think they will survive. Even their salt is too full of impurities so no serious person, especially, commercial and industrial users will buy their salt because it won't meet the standard. No wonder those of them mining salt illegally can't sell.” Mensah, Seven Seas, PRO emphasized.

Ironically as the local artisanal and small scale salt miners complain of inability to sell their salt unlike before the entry of the companies, both Seven Seas and Diamond Salt Ltd, complain of lack of access to the great potential that the West African market represents. Nigeria alone is a huge market waiting to be tapped due to its petro-chemical industry but it imports most of its salt from outside the West African region, Brazil largely. The result, Seven Seas produces under 60 percent of its full capacity (even as it has room for expansion) and Diamond, currently at 30 percent.

Meanwhile, the distress the takeover of the lagoon and ponds by large companies has brought to the communities around the Keta Lagoon basin, refuses to go away as poverty continues to eat deeper and deeper into the communities. Salt mining and fishing in the lagoon by the communities, major sources of their livelihood are no longer possibilities. Farming is also no longer possible in some areas as the adjoining farmlands to the lagoon have been taken over as well. Three clashes have so far occurred in 2016 and 2017 as communities attempted a fight back to reclaim their communal heritage, livelihood and dignity. The security services and the state agencies seemed to have won the battle so far but reading the mood of the communities the war is far from over and could be a long drawn-out one, if a mutually beneficial settlement is not arrived at.

\* *Cornelius Adedze is editor, African Agenda.*