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Uranium from Niger; energy for France…

Uranium from Niger; energy for France; pollution for local communities: contextualising a problematic tricycle

Uranium mining in Niger has raised various and significant environmental and political concerns in the Northern area of the country. Most of the Uranium produced in Niger is exported to France in order to sustain France's electricity production. Whereas France enjoys electricity, local communities in Arlit and Akokan suffer from pollution, unemployment, health issues and sub-standard or non-existent education.

Niger is the world's third to fifth largest uranium exporter with annual production estimated at 3,243 tonnes, 64% of export revenues (World Nuclear Association, 2012; Department of State, 2012). Yet, Niger ranks 186 out of 187 on the human development index (UNDP, 2011). Uranium has been mined in the Northern part of Niger for over 40 years. Previously, the extraction of Uranium was mainly undertaken by French companies and AREVA more specifically. "Areva ships around 3,000 tons of uranium from Niger to France, where two-thirds of electricity is generated from nuclear power" (Mark, 2011-online). The Uranium operations take place in the Northern part of Niger. This region is home to the Tuareg and is key to their survival. The Tuaregs are nomadic people, with ancestral linkages to the Berbers of North Africa, and live mainly in the northern part of the Niger (BBC, 2007).

Both local and international environmental activists have suggested that uranium mining in Niger is a case of exploitation in its most devastating manifestation; where human lives are at stake. "Uranium mining practices have endangered the health of some 80,000 people living in Arlit and Akokan" (Mark, 2011).

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Issues around Uranium mining and its impact on the local population have been a source of debates and low key conflicts in Niger. Locals are angered that businesses have not put in place sufficient measures to ensure that both locals' health and the environment are protected from the negative impacts of uranium mining. They are also dissatisfied with the government's inability to effectively regulate companies working in the region, thus enabling them to get away with polluting the land and affecting the health of locals. Although new environmental regulations are being put in place, there is no sufficient knowledge base upon which to undertake necessary remediation efforts critical to the region.

France's energy dependence on nuclear power, which is produced partly with Niger's uranium, has had a disastrous environmental impact on local communities in Niger. Initially AREVA denied all claims by local and environment groups that their activities had polluted the environment including the soil, water and air in Northern Niger mining towns and adversely affected the health of the local population. However, Greenpeace, in collaboration with the French independent laboratory CRIIRAD and the Nigerien NGO network ROTAB undertook a scientific study of the water, air and earth around AREVA mining towns and found the following (Greenpeace, 2010:6):

- *In 40 years of operation, a total of 270 billion litres of water have been used, contaminating the water and draining the aquifer, which will take millions of years to be replaced.*
- *In four of the five water samples that Greenpeace collected in the Arlit region, the uranium concentration was above the WHO recommended limit for drinking water.*
- *Fine (dust) fractions showed an increased radioactivity concentration reaching two or three times higher than the coarse fraction.*
- *The concentration of uranium and other radioactive materials in a soil sample collected near the underground mine was found to be about 100 times higher than normal levels in the region, and higher than the international exemption limits.*

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After Greenpeace published its initial findings at the end of November 2009, AREVA felt compelled to take action. As a result, limited areas were cleaned up, however, according to Greenpeace, it remains crucial that further studies of the area be conducted in order to ensure that the region is safe for locals. “Greenpeace is calling for an independent study around the mines and towns of Arlit and Akokan, followed by a thorough clean up and decontamination” (Greenpeace, 2010:6). Further, the organization calls for remediation initiatives to be undertaken in the Northern region of Niger.

Today, most uranium mining plants have been closed in France. Yet, through Areva, France continues to import uranium from plants across Africa particularly from Niger. As a result, France enjoys abundant energy while local communities in Niger suffer from health, social and economic problems. Yet, all the reports about Niger in the news cover poverty and drought, with no news of the price the country is paying in order to “power” France.

Niger is very rich in uranium and needs to benefit from a reform of the uranium sector and enforcement of environmental regulations. To date, uranium mining in Niger sustains light in France and darkness in Niger; a situation that needs to change for the long term benefit and stability of all. There is an urgent need for stronger government environmental measures in order to protect the land, environment and people in uranium mining areas of Niger. Companies such as Areva should also unilaterally take serious and effective steps to safeguard the environment in which they operate and profit from in Niger.

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