Resource Boom: Curse or Blessing?

Understanding Contentious Politics as a Social Mechanism

Africa has been experiencing staggering economic growth rates induced by a resource boom (McKinsey & Company 2014)[1]. Traditionally perceived as a crisis continent, Africa's fortunes have changed radically in recent years as the continent looks set to take off. This takes place against the background of a major shift within the world economy and also with regards to international cooperation: the emergence of non-traditional actors, the so-called BRICS[2] countries. These countries have been gaining significant influence on global affairs (cf. Kragelund, 2011; UNECA, 2013)[3] on account of their extensive mining and construction activities, and they have wrought a strong effect on the economic growth rates of African countries (Brautigam, 2009; Taylor 2006). Especially with regards to concerns over current development thinking, this significant change presents a particularly interesting background against which to look closely into Mozambique's resource boom. The rise of these new actors, who vary in terms of their political background, owes little to the aforementioned normative narrative of development policy and practice and casts doubts over the value of policy recommendations that are made to developing countries within the framework of the new aid architecture.[4] At the very least, the BRICS' unquestioned economic success seems to show that there may be development alternatives which do not necessarily require the types of policy measures that have been given to recipient countries through Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and "good governance" policies. This is all the more so since, unlike their traditional Western counterparts, these new actors have been more concerned with their own commercial interests rather than with the development record of recipient countries. They thus increasingly pose a challenge to the dominant thinking in development.

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[1] See: http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/economic_studies/whats_driving_africas_growth (27th March 2014)

[2] The acronym refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa as newly industrialised and fast-growing national economies.

[3] The acronym BASIC, which Kragelund (2011) focuses on, doesn't include Russia as 'BRICS' does. BRICS is one of the formal organisations with regular meetings and a say in global governance (such as e.g. the G20). The loose 'BASIC' grouping was formed in 2009 with the aim of acting jointly at the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summits

[4] For a trenchant critique of the normative narrative underlying neo-liberal politics see Chang (2002, 2010).

Mozambique is one of the countries in Africa which has experienced a resource boom with a strong involvement by BRICS countries. The city of Tete in northern Mozambique hosts several multinational companies; chief among them is the Brazilian multinational *Companhia Vale do Rio Doce*. *Vale S.A.* (as the company has been called since 2007) is one of the largest mining companies in the world and, while having recorded staggering expansion rates in Africa over the past 10 years, also won the caustic "Public Eye Award" in 2012 for being the worst multinational in the world. Now represented in the "Hall of Shame", *Vale* was given this award for corporate irresponsibility and contempt for the environment and human rights (cf. Public Eye Awards, 2014). Since 2004, Mozambique figures among the nearly 40 countries worldwide where *Vale* is operating. In Tete, amongst other regions in Mozambique, the multinational is committing over 3 Billion USD to extract 26 Million tons of raw coking coal a year, plus installing an electricity plant to cater for the central region. All this is fostering the country's economic growth (cf. Brito et al., 2012). Unsurprisingly however, in Mozambique, too, the company's presence has given rise to a variety of criticisms regarding its disrespect for environmental and social standards and the consequences of the local communities' displacement in order to make room for *Vale* to expand its mining operations.

While there had been positive responses regarding the economic and infrastructure upgrade which was expected to flow from the company's investment for the majority of the 'ordinary' people living in the affected regions, life does not appear to have changed significantly. Contrary to *Vale* and Government promises of better living standards, improved infrastructure, employment and income perspectives etc., the regions' inhabitants have been facing instead land grabbing, resettlements, non-transparent agreements and, as it appears, an oppressive police system[5]. Research has shown that due to the lack of an efficient legal framework and clear policy frameworks regarding land use and extractive industries, there are no official limits to the increase of business managers', politicians' and public servants' economic profits derived from the mining business (cf. Brito et al., 2012).

In reaction to the resettlement schemes initiated by Vale to clear the ground for the expansion of its mining operations, affected communities responded with acts of resistance and protest demanding a better deal: Numerous reports describe the extent of local discontent, as people reacted with both violent and non-violent activism and boycotts against the industry's non-

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[5] For an extensive analysis of the devastating consequences of the resettlements in Tete province, see the Human Rights Watch report „'What is a House without Food?' Mozambique's Coal Mining Boom and Resettlements" (2013)

compliance with resettlement-associated promises and agreements, such as paying indemnities, repairing damaged houses, addressing issues like unemployment, the lack of health services and unfertile land. Given the violent and repressive interventions by the local police and government officials (for instance during the widely reported road blockings in January 2012), everything pointed towards confrontation. Nevertheless, it seems as though the creation of a "Platform of Civil Society for Natural Resources and Extractive Industry", where civil society groups and representatives come together to claim a fair share, has placed these issues on the national agenda and led the government to set up a commission to address the matter (cf. Brito et al., 2012).

The conflictive nature of the relationship between the foreign investor and local communities as well as the widespread perception that the government might have been short-changed because of its own gullibility may not bode well for Mozambique. The latent blessing of the discovery of its mineral wealth could turn into a curse. This is all the more so since there is a strong BRICS involvement. These countries are not known for being particularly enthusiastic about good governance and human rights. Brazil, whence *Vale* comes, has traditionally not shown much interest in supporting good governance programmes or promoting transparency initiatives in order to control and eventually avoid a resource abundance-related nightmare. Considering the international community's concern over the ability of developing countries' weak institutional and political framework to face the challenges brought about by large reserves of natural resources, it is legitimate to ask about the prospects for development in the context of a resource boom. In this connection it seems important to ask how Mozambicans are reacting to the mining industry's behaviour, what their concerns and claims are, how local and national politicians respond to them and what role is played by investors.

These questions bear on the problems raised by the resource boom in Africa and, more specifically, whether they are a curse or a blessing for a country like Mozambique. The proposed project engages with these problems by drawing from theoretical insights resulting from discussions over the oil-curse thesis. We ask whether and how the problem changes its character with new actors, what adjustments the traditional aid architecture must make and, finally, we enquire into these issues by conceptualising them as manifestations of contentious politics, which can be usefully understood as social mechanisms.

The Oil Curse thesis

In the past, much research effort was invested in drawing attention to the fragile institutional framework of developing countries and to adverse international conditions. These were thought to be instrumental in turning resource wealth into a curse (Basedau and Mehler, 2005; Schaffer & Ziyadov 2012; Botchway 2011). Today, these fears have gained a new quality as much of the resource-based economic growth in Africa is promoted by BRICS countries, some of whom have a poor human rights record and some of whose enterprises are known for disrespecting environmental and social standards (cf. Chichava & Alden 2012; Zorzal & Silva, 2004). In this connection attention is often drawn to such famous cases as Nigeria, Algeria, Iran, to name only a few, which can be said to have experienced some sort of a resource curse and whose populations have suffered from their oil-exporting countries' economic deterioration and political decay (cf. Karl, 1997; Smith, 2008; Smith 2004; Dunning 2008). Though these represent striking examples of how challenging the management of resource extraction can be, one could suggest that precisely because the new investors from the Global South are solely concerned with their commercial interests rather than with development plans, they actually open up options for local responses informed by the active engagement of citizens with their political system (Jensen & Wantchekon 2004).

The resource curse is said to have come in a variety of forms, often correlated and multi-dimensional: Conflicts, war, corruption, dictatorship and poor economic growth are symptoms the majority of resource-rich countries have had to experience (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Haber and Menaldo 2011). Especially in Africa, where the growing commercial interest in natural resources such as oil, gas, coal, and copper, among others, has been attracting the interest of both research and the market, these resources have been blamed for the continent's persistent problems. Some have approached the issue by looking at it in terms of a "paradox of plenty" (Karl, 1997) while others have paid more attention to the causes and conditions linking resource wealth to a nation's political, social, economic shortcomings. They tend to claim that accounts of the problem are as diverse as the disciplines involved (cf. Basedau, 2005; Gary & Karl, 2003). Though some insight could be gained through these analyses, the interrelatedness of the various factors as well as the complexity of their direct and indirect, short, mid, and long term effects have made it extremely difficult to define when and to which degree a country is likely to face the resource curse (for a sceptical view see Brunnschweiler and Blute 2006).

From the point of view of development policy the resource curse merely confirmed the perils of bad governance. Not surprisingly, the answer that was thought to be more appropriate to

confront the resource curse was "good governance" (Leftwich, 1994; Santiso 2001;Dornboos 2010). This concept ties in with concerns about democracy, strong institutions, accountability, transparency and participation, among others. In the thinking about development which came in the wake of structural adjustment programmes and the consolidation of the so-called Washington Consensus (Mkandawire 2007;Szeftel 1998; Andrews 2008) "good governance" amounted to the realization that good economic policies and technical infrastructure measures on their own were not enough to make development policy. In line with the neo-liberal tradition underlying most of the development thinking that emerged in the eighties, the concept of "good governance" placed emphasis on those political values associated with the properties of liberal democracies, namely the rule of law, accountability, transparency and participation. In other words, after almost a decade of focusing on SAPs the attention of key institutions in international development policy and practice shifted from neo-liberal market reforms and economic growth towards the belief that "transparency matters" (cf. Chhotray & Stoker, 2009; Jenkins 2001). Transparency and accountability is what "good governance", i.e. accurately working institutions and well-designed policy, is expected to provide in order for development to happen. The mushrooming of governance programmes and initiatives such as the "Publish What You Pay" coalition, its "Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative", the World Bank's "Global Partnership for Social Accountability" (cf. World Bank 2012; McNeil & Malena, 2010) and other such initiatives account for this widely promoted philosophy. Aid-receiving governments were not only expected to undertake policy reforms in favour of free markets and liberal democracy. They also had to promise to implement internationally acknowledged measures in the name of "good governance". On the one hand, this came close to a realisation of failure as development policy faced up to the fact "… that adjustment was a political matter, with major impacts of the production and distribution of resources" (Chhotray & Stoker, 2009:99; see also Nanda, 2006; Doornbos 2001). On the other hand, it also pointed to a hidden, but crucial idea of relocating the responsibility for the success and failure of development plans and efforts from the designers' to the recipients' shoulders. Though there is much to commend in the emphasis placed on ownership rather than on conditionality[6], there is reason to be cautious. In fact, the success of good governance programmes is unclear, even though programmes to this end have been in place for some time (cf. e.g. Easterly, 2006; see Macamo 2010 for an empirical example). Furthermore, these programmes are based on epistemological assumptions that need to be critically addressed if

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[6] For a critique of conditionality see Collier (1997)

we are to adopt a non-normative analytical perspective on historical, social and political change in Africa.

In fact, no mining company's presence and activities will remain without significant economic, social, and political impact. Nor will this impact ever remain uncontested, let alone be viewed entirely in a positive light given the often conflicting economic and political interests involved and how they are perceived by the affected population (cf. for example Karl, 1997). While there may be a general consensus on the significance of the large scale foreign investments in natural resources like those taking place in Mozambique, the interest which they may have for an understanding of what enables development needs to be further explored. This might take one of two lines of reasoning.

One can adopt the dominant development perspective and take the view that these events are a threat to the international community's aid efforts in developing countries which, without the right transparency and accountability measures, will be doomed to failure. This perspective has come under considerable criticism, especially from approaches informed by what is known as "post-development criticism" (for a good summary of the argument see Ziai 2004). In fact, several authors have highlighted the importance of addressing social and political changes in a non-normative way by drawing from analytical perspectives favouring chance and openness, rather than predictability and control. One such author is James Scott (1998), whose book can be read as an indictment of dominant development thinking. He points out the pernicious effects of the totalitarian logic underlying what he describes as "schemes to improve human wellbeing". His plea for more respect and attention towards "métis"[7] mirrors his concern with the ability to react to and deal with the inherently uncertain nature of development. While large-scale bureaucratic interventions based on formulae and the logic of control and appropriation ironically have not been successful, "métis […] is plastic, local, and divergent [and it is] its contextualness, and its fragmentation that make it so permeable, so open to new ideas" (Scott, 1998:332). Similar claims are reflected in William Easterly's "The White Man's Burden" (2006), which laid the foundation for his massive indictment of development policy and provided the rationale for his suggestion that development efforts should follow the logic of the "Seekers", rather than that of the "Planners". The latter have, on Easterley's account, constantly failed at achieving their preset

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[7] Scott uses this notion to refer to tacit and practical everyday knowledge that is based on contextual experience, taking small steps, learning from mistakes, correcting them and moving on.

utopian goals. Borrowing from Karl Popper (1989), Easterly's counter-suggestion to current "utopian social engineering" in development practice is a call for piecemeal solutions. These are supposed to meet the needs pursued by local groups when they engage in politics. Scott and Easterly draw attention to the fact that the universalistic prescriptions of development knowledge run the risk of limiting our ability to appreciate the diversity, complexity, and fundamentally open-ended nature of history.

The other line of reasoning rejects prescriptive approaches and focuses instead on a descriptive, non-normative analysis of the actual processes as they unfold. This is in line with the growing importance of the idea of "social mechanisms" within sociology (Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Demeuleneare 2011; Aakvaag 2012). The idea seeks to account for the relationship between two phenomena or events without resorting to causal logic. It is in fact a set of systematic statements that describe such a relationship and in so doing suggests an account of how certain things came to be the way they are. This is a compelling idea within the context of discussions over development policy, for it suggests that much more attention should be paid to local context than has been the case beyond the lip service of participation and ownership. It meets a requirement that some have started making within sociology and which consists in paying even more attention to the local context as constitutive of social worlds (Fine, 2010).

Now, the two phenomena that we seek to understand are foreign direct investment and potential development outcomes. The intervening social mechanism consists of the contentious politics which are unleashed by the presence of the Brazilian mining company. Our approach to contentious politics is informed by the extensive work which has been carried out in the context of studying social movements and contention (see Macamo 2012a for a review of the analytical shortcomings). We draw from the work of Tilly and Tarrow (2007) to look for ways of identifying common and recurrent features of contention. One central aspect that the research will focus on is the idea of collective claims-making (Tilly, 2004) and their basic openness with regards to outcomes. It is particularly Tilly's suggestion that democracy may have been a contingent outcome of contentious politics (2004:6) which makes his approach appealing to this project, since we also make the assumption that development can be better understood as a contingent outcome of historical processes.

The significance of addressing contentious political processes

So far, not much attention has been paid to the potential of local contentious politics in revealing the conditions that favour, or undermine, progressive social change and positive development outcomes in the light of resource abundance. Yet, owing to the previously elaborated problematic implications of the assumptions underlying such thinking, we wish to address the contentious political processes unleashed by the presence of *Vale* that involve a collective making of claims and in turn provoke reactions on the part of the local (and national) political body. We believe that though at times violent and dangerous when looked at from the outside, these clashes and expressions of citizens' discontent attest to an actively engaged population claiming their actual participation in a political cause. And even if no one knows what direction the process will take or what changes it will bring about, the fact that it involves an actual negotiation of interests between the affected population and stakeholders from politics and economy raises hopes for an open path of development that is genuinely sustainable because it is locally grounded.

While considered from the development-thinking point of view it seems rather bold to articulate such a hypothesis, questions like these pose a necessary challenge to the epistemological foundations of development knowledge as it is represented in current development policy and practice. As shown so far, current development knowledge attributes the responsibility and ability to foster development to internationally engineered large-scale policy plans, rather than to locally negotiated small-scale strategies. The question which this belief in large-scale foreign intervention raises, however, is whether the assumptions which underlie it are adequate enough for an understanding of the nature of changes which are taking place in Africa. In other words, how useful and relevant are development concepts for a proper grasp of what is taking place on the African continent?

As the case of Mozambique shows, there exists a variety of reactions to and processes activated by *Vale*'s presence. If we are to address the questions whether and how they are contributing to the creation of conditions that enable positive development, we need to look at those events involving "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007:4). While collective action and contention can and, in fact, do occur in non-political settings, the inclusion of political, i.e. governmental actors, has been essential to democratisation processes in different countries and times as Tilly has demonstrated (1997, 2007). Like structural adjustment, good governance or social accountability, "democratisation", when considered to be the goal and outcome of large-scale

development initiatives, somehow loses its originally meaningful potential and becomes another attempt of trying to control historical processes. Critical authors such as Scott (1998) and Abrahamsen (2000) have even gone as far as to suggest that the new reform agenda may be aiming at making developing countries legible and disciplining countries, thus delivering them to neo-liberal intervention[8]. Yet, though tainted with a normative utopian development rhetoric, if democratisation is seen as a process that favours "broad, relatively equal political participation combined with binding consultation of political participants on governmental personnel, resources, and policy plus protection of political participants from arbitrary action by governmental agents" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007:66) it does, in fact, seem desirable. Interestingly enough, contentious politics are not considered as safeguards for democratic conditions: According to contention studies, de-democratisation is as likely an outcome of contentious processes as is democratisation.

This insight raises an important epistemological issue. The assumption that development is not only a goal, but also the fate of all countries may explain the belief in the idea that countries respond in the same way to external stimuli. The belief that there is one universally valid norm for the evaluation of historical change reveals a highly problematic teleological assumption on the basis of which development policy and practice has been seeking to render the world intelligible and amenable to change. Based on the idea that the world is rationally ordered and therefore capable of responding to causal stimuli, the development community's main concern has been to implement purportedly universally applicable plans and initiatives in order to foster development. Hence, development policy has been designed as if positive development outcomes could be conceptualised as a direct response to a discrete set of right factors, incentives, and attitudes implemented by reasonably acting individuals and institutions (see also Macamo 2013; Abrahamsen 2000). By so doing, however, the past decades of institutionalised aid have led to thinking about politics in Africa which not only tends to be highly normative, but has also failed to understand the changes that are currently taking place within the African continent. For, clearly, though representing a greatly comforting vision, the idea of social and political progress taking place in a linear and causal way cannot be upheld as either realistic or practicable (for a useful critique of this reasoning see Tenbruck 1989). Approaching local politics in the ways suggested by the literature on contentious politics may offer an analytically useful way out of this problem.

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[8] A point, which the applicant also made in an earlier analysis of Mozambique's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP, cf. Macamo 2006b)

Development, we argue in this project, resists definition and assessment in the way the international development apparatus has thought about it. Rather, it is a deeply political and contingent matter. We hope to make a case for an understanding of development as a constantly contested and changing process shaped by local politics, i.e. how a political community engages decision makers, contests policies and stands its ground. The nature of local politics does not have to be avowedly democratic, but we hope to find out under what conditions contention can yield democratic politics and development. In other words, the success chances of development depend to a considerable extent on the nature and quality of everyday political negotiations of interests between citizens and their politicians, rather than on normative large-scale transparency and accountability programmes (see also Jenkins 2001).

The aforesaid raises two related issues that are worth pursuing. To understand what is at stake in Mozambique's resource boom it may be useful to seek to describe and analyse the political processes unleashed by the presence of a foreign company. The case of Brazilian foreign investment in Moatize (Tete) may be a useful one. Drawing from the collection of material on the resettlement of a community to Cateme and the reaction of the latter to the resettlement, one may also address legal issues by inquiring into the legal framework within which foreign investment, the resettlement of people and local responses occur. These questions provide the backbone of a research application that will attempt to address these issues.

The envisaged study is planned for a maximum of three years. The major study will last for three years while the minor one, given its legal nature (much more straightforward data collection and analysis) will take two years to be accomplished. Both case studies will articulate tightly at the initial data collection and analysis procedure. This research project has identified a particular incident (the resettlement of a local community by the Brazilian mining company) as its main object. This raises some methodological issues pertaining to the fact that the events can only be recovered through the recollection of interview partners. There is, therefore, a sense in which the object is not available for direct observation which would in some ways call for a historical approach. The choice of a narrative analytical approach is designed to deal with this problem. Indeed, the main analytical perspective to be pursued in the major case-study will be based on narrative approaches (Czarniawska 2004; Elliot 2005), particularly those which view social life, especially the link between action and event, as an enacted narrative (Czarniawska, p.4). The thrust of the data collection procedure will take these analytical insights into account. This entails two types of data and two analytical

moments. The first type of data will consist of the transcripts of 30 interviews with members of the resettled community (including activists) as well as 15 expert interviews who will be asked to recount their experience of resettlement. Included in this type are also documents (legal documents, grey literature, etc.) as well as minutes or summaries of informal conversations conducted on site. Following the strictures of narrative research this material will undergo an initial analytical process during which attention will be paid to the ways of "emplotment" (White 1973; 1987), i.e. how individuals use tropes to connect events in a coherent narrative. This analysis will yield emic perspectives on the resettlement which will be used to structure the process of collecting the second type of data, namely focus group discussions. These, in turn, will also be transcribed and analysed with a broader question in mind, namely how they help to understand the nature of collective claims-making.

The study is planned for a maximum of three years. The major study will last for three years while the minor one will take two years to be accomplished. Both case studies will entail extensive field work periods, especially during the first year, during which both researchers will collect interview and documentary data. The collected data will be analysed and cross-checked jointly in the course of the first year to allow for the preparation of focus group discussions to be carried out in the second year and which will serve as the basis for the central analytical work that should occur later in that year and early in the third year.

Major case study: What are the political processes unleashed by Vale operations in Moatize?

The field of study entailed in this question is the broader field of contentious politics as defined by Tilly and Tarrow (2007). The research will be conducted in the small town of Moatize, where Vale mining operations are concentrated, and the settlement of Cateme, where local communities were relocated. It will focus on one key event, namely the resettlement of inhabitants from Moatize to Cateme, and the protest activities in the wake of that measure. The basic unit of study will be a sample of individuals affected by the measures, local and external activists championing the cause of local communities and local decision makers and Vale personnel who deal directly with the claims of the local communities. Four data collection methods will be deployed: narrative interviews, focus group discussions, informal interviews and participant observation. Narrative interviews will be applied to elicit local stories about the resettlement process from individuals affected by the resettlement measures with a focus on how this experience has shaped their claims-making. This tool will

be applied right at the beginning of the research with an envisaged number of 30 interview partners. The interviews will be recorded, transcribed and with the help of MaxQDA analysed with reference to the tropes which interview partners use to make sense of their experience. Focus group discussions will be used at a later stage in the research process (in the second data collection round). They will be based on themes elicited from the narrative interviews and informal interviews. A number of 2-3 focus group discussions are envisaged. One group will consist of members of the affected communities, another of a mixture of members of the affected communities and activists and yet another one of members of affected communities, activists and local decision makers. These focus group discussions will be recorded and analysed with MaxQDA. Informal interviews will be conducted with activists, local decision makers and Vale personnel. The main purpose of these interviews is to collect factual information about the resettlement process and document what these individuals know, did and believe. Data registration for informal interviews will consist mainly of brief minutes to be written by the researcher, but where possible they will be recorded. Finally, participant observation will be deployed to enable the researcher to experience certain activities that are part of contentious politics (protests, meetings, interactions with decision makers and Vale personnel). These will be described in detail and used to inform the design of the focus group discussions as well as the overall analysis of data. In other words, in designing the focus group discussions care will be taken to ensure that the hot issues which should structure the sessions encourage participants to reflect upon contentious politics in terms of a tension between action and event and how the underlying claims-making render their lives intelligible to themselves and to observers.

Minor case study: What is the legal framework for the interaction between Vale and the local communities in Moatize?

The field of study for the minor case study is the same. The unit of analysis will be mainly legal documents to be supplemented by 15 expert interviews conducted locally with local decision makers, activists (especially, legal advisors) and Vale personnel. The basic aim of the minor case study is to produce a description of the legal framework within which contentious politics take place in order to ascertain both how laws constrain or enable claims-making, and also local notions of justice. These will be ascertained through in-depth interviews with key informants from the community (mainly leaders, both traditional and modern). The case study will be conducted by a Mozambican researcher with a legal academic background, and the study will be sensitive to methodological insights from legal

anthropology, especially those which emphasize the idea of "forum shopping" (Rouland 1998, Roberts 2013; Zips & Weilenmann 2012) in the context of debates over legal pluralism. After having been abolished by the Marxist-oriented liberation movement that came to power in 1975, traditional authorities were resuscitated after the end of the civil war as part of the process of decentralization that came in its wake. While the law provides for clear definitions of the competences of such authorities, it is not clear what counts as "traditional authority" and how much weight institutions and individuals lend to these authorities in the context of dispute settlement. The resettlement of communities has given rise to various disputes around entitlements to land and compensation which are being articulated in language that speaks to legal norms which may be incommensurate. Drawing from ideas informed by legal pluralism the minor study should produce data on the basis of which the normative framework for individual and community action and practices can be clearly described and assessed for relevance.

Expected results and their relevance to scientific and practical advancements

The resource boom is an opportunity for Africa. It is also an opportunity for research as it creates room for questions to be asked that are of central importance not only to our ability to understand what enables development, but also to challenge our ways of accounting for historical change and the constitution of social worlds. While a considerable body of literature has begun to pay attention to the resource boom, most of it has tended to recycle older debates which do not seem to confront the epistemological assumptions underlying development thinking and do little to improve sociology's ability to be a valid participant in these debates. This research proposal engages development policy and practice as well as sociology. It challenges the causal and linear assumptions of the former to the effect that development can be engineered through the right kind of policies. It argues for the primacy of social action embedded in local contexts as the better bet in assessing potential development outcomes. It speaks to sociology's conspicuous silence on these matters by appealing to the notion of "social mechanisms" as a useful explanatory factor. The relevance of the proposed research project is twofold. First and foremost, the project can make a contribution towards equipping political sociology and development sociology with theoretical and analytical assumptions that will enable them to develop a research program for the study of development issues which is unencumbered by normativity. Secondly, in drawing attention to alternative accounts of development, the research project can help development policy and practice to redefine its

role in the new context that the resource boom and the appearance of new actors have produced.

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