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## Burkina Faso: Gold, a Double-Edged Sword?

Monday 1 April 2013, by **Geneviève Lavoie-Mathieu**



**Talatout Boukari, community leader of Essakane in Burkina Faso, in partnership with the international organization FIAN, was in the Netherlands to raise awareness on the negative impact of Canadian gold mining company, IAMGOLD, on its community.**

Unlike Canadians, “we didn’t need a diploma to find gold”, declared Talatout Boukari, president of the village development council of Essakane, in Burkina Faso, speaking at a conference in the Netherlands on March 22, 2013.

In fact, the people from Essakane have been living off artisanal gold mining for over 25 years. Ironically, following the arrival of IAMGOLD in the region, they have been displaced and refused the right to work for the Canadian gold mine, because “they were not qualified enough.”

“We discovered gold in the region of Essakane in 1985”, told the Burkinabé at a conference at the University of Wageningen. “It was a year of famine. This gold we discovered came as a gift of God”, he continued.

In collaboration with FIAN International, an organization working for the right to food worldwide, Boukari flew from Burkina Faso for a conference tour to raise awareness on the critical situation in Essakane.

It was also the occasion for FIAN to present a new documentary called “**Prospérité sous terre**” (“Prosperity Beneath the Soil”) realized by Ronnie Rodriguez. The film shows the impact of gold mining in Northern Burkina Faso and the fight of the community that is affected by the mining giant, IAMGOLD.

Essakane is located in the North-East of Burkina Faso, in the Sahel region. There are more than 13 communities who inhabit the area, which represents around 2600 households who identify themselves with various ethnic groups, such as the Fulani, Tuareg and Sonraïs.

In 2003, following measures taken by the government under the advice of the World Bank, laws were reformed to facilitate foreign investments into the country. As a result, the country saw its gold production skyrocket.

Between 2007 and 2011, gold production went from 5.5 tons to almost 33 tons produced per year. In 2000, IAMGOLD was granted 10,000 ha at Essakane for the construction of an industrial

gold mine, the most important mining project nationwide.

Boukari explained that the settlement of the Canadian mining company in the region has meant major life changes for the 13,000-person rural community: first, the government pressured them to relocate. According to Boukari the government and IAMGOLD promised them new land, new houses, and jobs, but the hope of a better life never materialized in the end.

Dissatisfaction has grown in the community mainly because mining activities have impacted their traditional way of living. Industrial gold mining interferes with agricultural activities, herding, and artisanal gold mining, or 'gold washers.'

For example, market gardening activities were relocated to zones that are not as fertile as before. The last harvests of sorghum are an illustration of this, said Nikita Shahbazi, representing FIAN Netherlands. Yields were only one thirteenth of what they usually are, she said, which is less than sufficient to fulfill the community's needs.

Access to water has also become problematic. While in the past the community owned over 2000 artisanal wells, the mining company now provides them with one tank of water, which is not enough for all activities in this arid region. Many also fear the contamination of the environment and water through heavy metals, as it occurred in [Bolivia](#), for example and in the [Philippines](#).

Boukari explains that herders and livestock keepers were told not to let their animals feed from zones near the mine, as they would be contaminated and would be improper to consume. New houses were built for them but as shown in the documentary *Prospérité sous terre* they are cement cubes not originally conceived for living, but are rather quick alternatives to relocate people.

For FIAN, the way in which IAMGOLD manages the operations represents an important violation of human rights, notably the right to adequate food, access to water, to a healthy environment, education and employment.

FIAN is currently mediating discussion with the main stakeholders and attempting to gather the government, IAMGOLD, and the community members together to come to a common agreement, which could lead to improvements for the Essakane community.

IAMGOLD is now planning to expand its mining operations, which would mean that the Essakane community would have to be relocated once more. In total, more than 600 permits have been granted for mining since 2003, and there are four more large-scale projects that are to be implemented before 2014.

According to FIAN, more than 90 percent of the profits of the Essakane mine go to Canadian shareholders. Boukari said that its community is not opposed to mining but that they want to have their fair share of benefits.

Mining activities in Essakane will cease in 14 years, according to estimates from FIAN, but this will not happen without leaving a hole in the landscape, as well as in the pockets and hearts of Burkinabé.



## April 2013

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