

UGANDA

Slow Death at Katwe Salt Lake



Salt mining at Lake Katwe dates back to the 16th century. Lake Katwe is too salty to support aquatic life, but it has sustained thousands of Katwe inhabitants.

On a typical day, more than 4,000 women and men of Katwe spend more than eight hours under the scorching equatorial sun harvesting salt from the highly polluted waters, which contain concentrated salt (brine), ammonia, hydrogen and other gases. The miners work without protective gear and suffer the consequences of prolonged exposure to hazardous chemicals and inadequate access to health care.

Salt mining is labour-intensive and involves the use of rudimentary techniques. Women miners are particularly vulnerable and negatively impacted. Common health problems as a result of salt mining include inflammation of the uterus – and even outright loss of the uterus – dehydration, and chemical-induced burns and infection. Due to the influx of transient traders from other parts of Uganda and beyond, the prevalence of HIV infection is also high and women, again, are most vulnerable due to poor access to health care and a work environment that can only exacerbate their already precarious circumstances.

Women are specifically involved in winning salt.



This is a process of recovering salt from concentrated solution after it crystallizes in open pools, known as salt pans, which run along the shores of Lake Katwe. Although salt winning is done predominantly by women, the majority hold no ownership of either the process or the profits. Most salt pans are family businesses, and ownership resides with men, through a system of inheritance. Women, as daughters or workers or both, have no title and are at the bottom of the chain of production, notwithstanding the fact that they constitute the majority of harvesters.

The work of harvesting, winning and selling of rock and table salt is an age old productive activity from which traders make the greatest gains by peddling the salt across Uganda and neighbouring countries like Rwanda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Although miners are by law obliged to remit taxes to the central government, little has been done to regulate or improve their working conditions. The salt miner’s governance body – the Katwe Salt Conservation Board – is responsible for overseeing salt mining operations, but it has done little to ensure good working conditions and negotiate for better returns for the miners.

After taking part in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, women miners at Katwe have deepened their understanding of the impacts of salt mining on their lives. Given that representation by the Katwe Salt Conservation Board is falling short, they have formed the Katwe Women Salt Miners Association to demand accountability and lobby for appropriate action to improve their livelihoods.



Susan Kabugha applying super glue to cover her wounds – chemical burns suffered from salt mining.

This participatory action research project was generously supported by the following funders:

Action Aid Netherlands, Africa Groups of Sweden, CCFD – Terre Solidaire, Dreikonigsaktion, Fastenopfer, Ford Foundation, Heinrich Boll Foundation, Mamacash, Norwegian People's Aid, and Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa.

**For the full report see <http://womin.org.za/images/docs/uganda-report.pdf>
This research project is a collaboration of WoMin and National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE).**



National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) is a lobby and advocacy organization giving voice to vulnerable communities and the environment of Uganda. Key activities include media campaigns, public meetings (political cafés), commissioning and publishing research and producing documentaries that expose development models with gross human rights footprints. <http://nape.or.ug/>



WoMin – African Gender and Extractives Alliance brings together non-governmental organisations and grassroots women resisting destructive extractivism, focusing on mining, oil and gas in Sub-Saharan Africa. Established in 2013, WoMin and its allies undertake women-led research, solidarity exchanges, education and campaigns to promote development models advancing gender, ecological, energy and climate justice. www.womin.org.za