



Senegal

Ndeye Marie Diedhiou

The “female warlord” of resources in Casamance



Introduction and context

Senegal is increasingly positioning itself as a country with rich natural resources, in light of the significant deposits already being mined – phosphates, gold, zircon and iron – or quarried, alongside recent discoveries of oil and gas. As a result, the government is aiming to make the sector one of the pillars of the country’s development, as indicated in its strategic economic development plan (the Emerging Senegal Plan).

Various reforms in the normative and political framework since 2016, adopted to accompany the implementation of the EITI (including the revision of the Mining, Oil and Gas Codes, the adoption of the policy on the mining sector and the adoption of the law on local content) reflect this ambition. Alongside these efforts are the reorganisation of the institutional framework (including departmental reforms within the Ministry of Mines and Geology and the reorganisation of PETROSEN) and the creation of new institutions, such as COS PETROGAZ and GES – PETROGAZ.

In spite of the progress made, however, it is clear that there has been little consideration of social needs in areas where resources are produced. People’s lack of access to basic social services is clearly visible, especially in these areas, with people on low incomes, a lack of amenities and financial benefits accruing to local authorities. Moreover, even though the law clearly contains provisions that should allow the population to benefit from their resources, the revenues received to date by companies and the state have not had sufficient positive effects on the lives of people, particularly women.

The Senegalese state already has a political and legal framework that includes gender equality in its general principles (women, young people, vulnerable people, minorities, etc.) and women’s rights specifically. In fact, several legal texts refer to gender. They include the Constitution, Act no. 2010-11 of 28 May 2010, which establishes absolute parity between men and women in all fully or partially elected institutions, the national economic strategy document (the Emerging Senegal Plan), the national strategy on equity and gender equality, and the circular from the Prime Minister’s office in 2013, urging sector-specific ministries to mainstream gender-related issues in their interventions.

Paradoxically, however – and in spite of the systems in place – the analysis of the extractive industries carried out by the national Publish What You Pay (PWYP) coalition as part of

the gender pilot project shows a marked gap between the existence and implementation of these provisions. By way of example, even though Article 109 of the 2016 Mining Code establishes the principle of equality of opportunity for access to jobs and training, **the EITI Report 2018 reveals that just 9% of women are employed in the extractive industries.**

In terms of women’s representation on the bodies that govern natural resources in Senegal, the gap is still huge, both on the EITI’s Multi-Stakeholder Group and on governance bodies in the national coalition. At the moment, Ndeye Marie Diedhiou is the only woman responsible for coordinating a regional branch of PWYP. This study provides an opportunity to highlight the remarkable work done by the woman who has been nicknamed the “female warlord” of resources in Casamance.



Ndeye Marie Diedhiou (middle) surrounded by the members of the Committee fighting against violence based on gender, standing in front of their headquarters in Ziguinchor.

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Ndeye Marie Diedhiou – a transparency champion speaking up for local communities

The national PWYP coalition in Senegal is organised in regional branches, to “be closer to the communities affected by mining operations”, according to its national coordinator, Ibrahima Sory Diallo. As he explains,

“It’s fair to say that the capital, Dakar, is still the main decision-making centre, but there are other issues at stake for people living with the paradox of abundant resources. And in a context of limited trust between the key actors, the emergence of local leadership remains a major challenge in our area of activities.”

PWYP Senegal currently has seven branches in several of the country’s regions, of which just one, Ziguinchor, is headed by a woman. Her name is Ndeye Marie Diedhiou, and her actions have earned her the nickname of the “female warlord” of resources in Casamance.

The Niafrang dune (which is named after the village there), on the northern bank of the Casamance, is coveted for the zircon in its sand. After Casamance had been rocked by over 30 years of civil war, a ceasefire was agreed and signed by the government of Senegal and the pro-independence rebel forces of the MFDC in December 2004. But just a month before the signature of the ceasefire, an exploration permit was granted by ministerial order to the Australian mining company Carnegie Ltd (although the permit was subsequently transferred to Astron). The people had been neither consulted nor informed.

A public enquiry was set up but the first hearing only took place in 2011, while the people of



Ndeye Marie Diedhiou surrounded by Women of the Platform in traditional ceremonial clothes, welcoming the President of the Republic of Senegal in Ziguinchor in order to share their message for peace in Casamance.

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Casamance continued to criticise the lack of information available about the project. The villages surrounding the Niafrang dune depend on rice cultivation, vegetable growing, fishing, palm oil production, beekeeping, oyster fishing and tourism. The paddy fields, palm groves and villages are protected from the sea and its salt water by the dune. As first-hand witnesses of the effects of zircon mining in The Gambia, the people of Casamance feared that the activity would contaminate the groundwater, endangering the natural environment. People living in Casamance and their neighbouring villages who opposed the planned mine, along with several of their partners, mobilized and organized themselves into a group to warn about the exploitation of the area. It was against this background, that the national PWYP coalition turned its attention to the area and picked up the case. If the project was to be truly legitimate, it had to highlight the concerns of local communities. But it was also essential to find the right voice to convey their message and



oppose the defence of private interests – and that voice belonged to Ndeye Marie Diedhiou.

She is the only female coordinator of a regional branch of PWYP in Senegal, a coalition she has been involved in since she joined the global movement. Her contribution to the dynamism of the coalition is exceptional. Her leadership and unending support for the coalition’s activities has greatly impressed PWYP Senegal’s national coordinator:

“ I have known Ndeye Marie since 2013, but I had heard her speak well before that, through the Platform for Peace in Casamance. I recall her as someone who stood out for her rigour, her professionalism, her devotion to her work, and in particular, her excellent management skills. In the Platform for Peace in Casamance, she worked with both men and women, which showed that she has the skills and know-how needed. Everyone came together alongside her.

Before I set up the branch of the coalition in Ziguinchor, I ran a survey on moral standards. I asked the people and authorities in the area who we could count on to act as regional coordinator. They pointed me unanimously towards Mrs Thiam [the name of her late husband]. In brief, she is a champion of social entrepreneurship on all fronts!”

Since she was appointed head of the branch in Ziguinchor, Ndeye Marie Diedhiou has not missed a single one of the coalition’s important meetings. Activists in the movement are unanimous: she embodies the credibility and legitimacy the coalition needs to move forward successfully. As a member of the Senegalese delegation to PWYP’s Global Assembly in Lima in 2016, she played a leading role in representing the national coalition and promoting its work. Nonetheless,

her position does not protect her from certain risks associated with her involvement in the sector, particularly in a hostile region.

Impact

Diversity, inclusion, participation and united action

The first step proposed by Ndeye Marie Diedhiou to get women’s voices heard was to bring all women’s organisations, associations, civil-society organisations (CSOs) and other influential women together around a common framework for action. Impressively, she managed to mobilise 170 member associations from across the Casamance natural region around the Women’s Platform for Peace. Her aim was to bring together the energy, skills and expertise of each member organisation to influence the process of establishing peace and create a positive



Ndeye Marie posing in front of the headquarters of the Women’s Platform for Peace in Ziguinchor.

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environment for women’s rights – and ensure respect for them – in all areas of working life.

This inclusive approach quickly allowed the Platform to establish itself as a key interlocutor not only in the peace process in Casamance, but also in economic development initiatives and defending the rights of women and girls.

In spite of the diverse range of member organisations involved, Ndeye Marie Diedhiou managed to establish a shared vision, by defining broad objectives and priority areas for activities that allowed each of them to benefit from the Platform. The priorities identified for advocacy efforts, with a particular focus on “women, peace and security”, “human rights”, and “the environment and sustainable development” helped to mobilise all the member associations around common goals.

From joined-up action to influencing change

Following an interview with the consultant in charge of the study and the publication of the report analysing gender issues in Senegal, Ndeye Marie Diedhiou demanded parity for branch representation on the Executive Committee. Two delegates from each branch are now appointed to the Executive Committee, one man and one woman. This decision was adopted at the meeting of the Executive Committee and enshrined in the code of conduct of PWYP Senegal. Ndeye Marie Diedhiou and Marieme Soda Mbacke have successfully extended the rule to member representation at all meetings and activities organised by the coalition. Thanks to the gender project, they have been able to undertake a review of the coalition’s code of conduct, to encourage formal consideration of balanced gender representation, not only within PWYP bodies but also the civil-society college of the EITI’s Multi-Stakeholder Group.

Awareness-raising on issues in the extractive sector and gender

Until now, understanding the issues associated with the exploitation of mining resources has represented a major challenge for civil society actors in the Casamance region. Apart from the presence of zircon and oil in the coastal area, the key point is the lack of communication by the public authorities. For example, the exploration permit granted to the Australian mining company Carnegie Ltd in 2004 was authorised without any consultation or provision of information to the local population. Moreover, the first public hearing only took place in 2011. It was not until Ndeye Marie Diedhiou was appointed to head up the branch of PWYP in that region that people began to be better informed about issues affecting the exploitation of resources. She mobilised members of the national coalition



The President of PeaceWomen Across the Globe (PWAG) presenting Ndeye Marie Diedhiou with the signing of a funding agreement for the “Tables of Peace” project.

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and key actors in the sector first, to publish the environmental and social impact assessment and, later, to analyse the legal framework for the sector, organise field visits to the site and arrange a study trip for members of the branch to the Thiès region.

Gender-related issues now occupy a significant place in awareness-raising and advocacy efforts. Indeed, not only does the branch now have a larger number of women’s organisations, but the future exploitation of zircon will have more positive consequences for women. The Niafrang sand dune, which is around 6 km long, separates the salt water of the ocean from the Casamance river, creating a positive environment for rice cultivation, agricultural activities, vegetable growing and small-scale fishing. These activities are the main source of income for people in the area, particularly women, since it is the women in Casamance who work the land: agriculture and vegetable growing are their primary areas of activity. The disappearance of the dune would create enormous risks for the environment, increase the salinity of the river water significantly and consequently, have a drastic impact on the means of subsistence available to people living here.

Ndeye Marie Diedhiou played a proactive role in all activities involved in implementing the gender pilot project in Senegal (from the gender assessment to capacity-building workshops). In spite of the challenging circumstances, with actions on the ground taking place in a hostile environment, she managed to explain to women in the region how mining activities could impact on their economic situation. As she likes to remind people,

“respect for women’s rights is a question of survival, and that serves everyone’s interests, both men and women.”

Difficulties encountered and lessons learned

Activism in a hostile environment: a justified commitment, but not one without risks

Viewed by visitors and tourists as one of the most beautiful part of Senegal and West Africa, the historic and natural Casamance region has been battered and bruised since the early 1980s by a pro-independence war between the Senegalese armed forces and the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC). An initial serious incident in 1982 brought things to a head and triggered a conflict that would affect the region for over 30 years. It was this context that sparked Ndeye Marie Diedhiou’s commitment to the community, as she recalls:

“Unfortunately, I grew up in an environment marked by 30 years of conflict. As is often the case elsewhere around the world, armed conflicts have a significant negative effect on the lives of women and children. It was this situation that drove my commitment at a very early stage and pushed me to get involved in the peacebuilding movement, here in my region.”

Stereotypes: an obstacle to female leadership

Female activists are subject to verbal abuse, insults and threats from the MFDC and now appear to be the “enemy of choice” at all levels. She too has been subjected to stereotyping, in spite of an approach of coordination that emphasises inclusion and participation. Casamance – and its rural areas in particular – is known for its traditional conservatism, with the dominant male often imposing the rules. She is well aware of it:



“As much as they appreciate my leadership and rigour, I pay the price for it. There is no shortage of ways to undermine me. Some say, ‘this woman doesn’t think before she makes a decision – she just follows her gut.’”

Those who are least tolerant think she is reckless for getting involved in an area where security remains precarious. The zircon case is so complex, given the divergent interests of the various actors, that her intervention is not without its risks for her.

“Sometimes the armed factions of the rebel movement threaten to kill me and declare me persona non grata in the area. They think that my attitude and my determination to reconcile the parties are synonymous with complicity with the company, and, from the government’s perspective, with corruption. These are often ill-intentioned people who put me in an awkward position with the communities and act as informers within the MFDC to tarnish my reputation and my dignity as a woman.”



Hearing of the 2012 Presidential Election candidates by the female members of the Platform. Candidate Macky Sall giving Ndeye Marie the Memorandum he has signed.

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Legitimacy – a key success factor in the fight.

Ndeye Marie Diedhiou has certainly made sacrifices, sometimes at risk to her career as a teacher, or simply her life. She has flirted with death on several occasions, because her efforts to bring peace to Casamance were often misunderstood.

“My detractors found every way they could of harming or intimidating me. At one time, there was a great deal of misunderstanding between me and the key players. Some people who were doing well out of the conflict, and who were acting in bad faith, told lies about me and what I was doing.

They told the state authorities that I was on the side of the MFDC during advocacy campaigns to protect the Niafrang dune, and told the MFDC that I was a spy working for the Senegalese state. These actions put my life in danger and sapped the movement’s credibility in the eyes of all stakeholders. They went as far as spreading stories about my private life on social media.

They tarnished my reputation, spreading false information about my professional and private life. But it would have taken more than that to discourage me. I had a hard time, but fortunately I drew strength from the determination of the brave women who accompanied me on this adventure.”



Hope for a better future for women and women’s rights?

Does Ndeye Marie Diedhiou manage to remain hopeful as she does battle in hostile territory? Without hesitation she says ‘yes’:

“What drives my commitment is stronger than the risks I run. The living conditions women in my region face, their very survival, the conditions I myself experienced alongside my mother, as the eldest in a family of 12 children, conditions that I still face in an environment where sociocultural and religious conservatism still reign, conditions that I experience simply because I am a woman taking a stand in the midst of an armed conflict: these conditions now define the very essence of my existence. And so, I remain hopeful, because the men and women who surround me trust me, in spite of the immense challenges we face on a daily basis.

When I look around and I see all these great people who are counting on me, the words of encouragement of my late husband – who was always my “gender champion” – resonate with me: “Keep going – you’re leading a noble fight.” ■



Meeting to review the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, in Dakar, Senegal.

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