

Rare Earth Mining, Armed Conflicts, and Impact on Livelihood Strategies of Local Kachin People in Chihpwi and Pangwa, Kachin State, Myanmar

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Abstract

This study examines how rare earth mining affects the livelihoods of local people in Pangwa and Chipwi, Kachin State, Myanmar. In recent years, these areas have become major rare earth mining zones. The rapid growth of mining has caused serious environmental, social, and economic harm to local communities. The research is based on semi-structured interviews with community leaders, farmers, herders, mining laborers, and social activists, and participant observation, and uses two concepts, such as Armed Capitalism and the Livelihood Approach. Armed Capitalism defines how armed groups, formerly the Border Guard Force (BGF) and now the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), act as economic actors, partnering with Chinese companies to benefit from illegal extraction. This helps explain how military power, profit-seeking, and weak regulation combine to drive environmental harm and local exploitation. The Livelihood Approach focuses on how local households use five capitals, such as natural, social, physical, human, and financial, to cope and adapt when resources decline. Findings show that rare earth mining has caused severe environmental damage, which directly destroys local livelihoods. Farmers report lower yields, especially for oranges and black cardamom, and some lost paddy land due to landslides, so their rice harvest will no longer suffice to feed their families. Young people face higher risks of drug use, joblessness, and migration. Some households try to cope by opening shops, working in mines, or selling land for children's schooling. A common adaptation is installing pipelines to bring clean water from mountain sources 5–10 miles away. Some locals distrust the armed group because deals are secret and mining money appears to benefit the military and elites. While a few earn short-term gains, most suffer greater insecurity and loss. The study recommends actionable environmental safeguards, transparent contracts, legal land protections, community-led monitoring, and stronger social protections.