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ARTICLE

“Come what may, we bring those resources to play”: Narratives, future-making, and the case of bauxite extraction at Atewa Forest, Ghana

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Abstract

The Ghanaian government aims to develop an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry and seeks to further bauxite extraction at several sites across the country. This vision is embedded within the political agenda “Ghana Beyond Aid,” introduced by the country’s president, Nana Akufo-Addo. One possible mining area is Atewa Forest, one of the few remaining intact upland evergreen rainforests in Ghana. This study highlights the important narratives local NGOs use to mobilise against bauxite mining at Atewa Forest: (a) the case of environmental justice with a strong focus on clean water and (b) the foreign Chinese influence. Both narratives have gained national as well as international attention. However, the government avoids direct discussion and legitimises extraction through the newly created political agenda Ghana Beyond Aid. The latter is better understood as a future-making practice, a practice creating a single development path that only needs to be managed. At the same time, revenue from refined bauxite finances huge infrastructure projects that are the foundation of this political agenda. In addition, this legitimisation to extract bauxite appears to be powerful because it is linked to broader global narratives about modernisation and economic growth.

KEYWORDS

Atewa Forest, bauxite mining, future-making, Ghana, narrative

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Atewa Forest Reserve in the Eastern Region of Ghana has gained international attention, due to plans to mine bauxite in the forest reserve. On the one hand, this is because the forest is a biodiversity hotspot and one of the few remaining intact upland evergreen rainforests in Ghana. On the other hand, this is because the plan to mine bauxite at Atewa is linked to a deal between the Government of Ghana and the Chinese company Sinohydro. The deal states that Sinohydro will invest and build infrastructure across the country for refined bauxite in return. Ghana has vast bauxite deposits, many untapped. Therefore, the resource remains economically unimportant for the country.

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In 2018, Ghana's president, Akufo-Addo, introduced his national vision "Ghana Beyond Aid." The agenda functions as a blueprint for the country's further development and transformation. Within this vision, the development of an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry plays a significant role. However, local NGOs fight the government for their plans to mine at Atewa Forest. I observed the dispute about bauxite mining at Atewa Forest from 2018 until 2020. From a political ecology perspective, I was looking at structures, actors, institutions, and narratives.

This paper specifically looks at the dimension of narratives with a focus on three questions: (a) What are main narratives of local NGOs against bauxite mining at Atewa Forest? (b) What is the role of the political agenda Ghana Beyond Aid in this conflict? (c) To what extent is future-making a benefiting perspective for political ecology? Results are based on interviews with NGOs that were conducted during three field trips in March 2018, 2019, and 2020. In addition, I analysed political documents, press statements, as well as speeches. The paper elaborates how the legitimisation for bauxite extraction is created through the embedding of bauxite within the national vision Ghana Beyond Aid. Usually narratives are defined as stories of past events told to interpret and ascribe meaning to these events and guide action (Dietz, 2019). However, Ghana Beyond Aid appears to be better understood as future-making practices exercising political power by creating a desirable future vision that acquires and legitimises actions in the present to get there.

2 | NARRATIVES AND FUTURE-MAKING

Dietz (2019) defines narratives as stories of past events told to interpret and ascribe meaning to them and to guide further action. In contrast to discourses, narratives can, according to Haarstad and Fløysand (2007), be seen as perceptions that are specific or modes of explanation promoted by an actor or a group of actors. Within the discourse on environmental protection, various groups can promote their particular narratives on central environmental problems and the best strategies for handling related problems. Therefore, discourses are a general exchange of meaning on a general topic that structures how a particular topic is thought about (Rose, 2001). Dietz and Engels (2020) argue that discourses and narratives are important for structures and institutions (rules, norms, etc.) since the latter need to be constantly reproduced and reconfirmed through images, ideas, arguments, stories, statistics, etc. In addition, De Moor and Wahlström (2019) point out that narratives play a crucial part in shaping social movements. However, narratives are not powerful *per se*; they unfold power if they resonate with people's cultural norms and beliefs and if they refer to context-related social actions and events (Dietz, 2019). Prause and Le Billon (2020) argue that narratives are strategic stories constructed by resistance movements to articulate claims or grievances, promote the interests of the resisting group, and oppose the narratives of their antagonists. Discourses and narratives are crafted by stakeholders to mobilise for or against mining projects. In this way, mining discourses reflect competing views and benefits within the existing economic and political order.

Dietz and Engels (2020) developed a framework for analysing conflicts over land from a dialectical perspective and with four dimensions: structure, agency, institution, and narrative. In my case, I am focusing on narratives and legitimisation of institutions. Furthermore, on how actors use narratives to legitimise and what they do. I am building on recent contributions to political ecology to focus more on time and future as a strategy (see Fent & Kojola, 2020). Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015) give more attention to future narratives and Müller-Mahn (2019) introduces future-making, a practice that envisions a desirable future and thereby gains control over present ideas. According to Knappe et al. (2019), future-making practices are social and political endeavours that implicitly or explicitly establish relationships or refer to future situations. These practices are contextual and positional with multiple stakeholders and interests, always making present future-images political (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015).

If future-making practices are effective, they can become powerful tools for creating (new) orders, empowering or excluding actors, and even preserve or transform fundamental values such as the ones that determine what people perceive as a good life or a desirable future (Knappe et al., 2019). Future-making requires performative action that creates greater visibility for some future imaginations while silencing others (Müller-Mahn, 2019). Sejersen shows in the example of extractive industries in Greenland that certain actors can mobilise for an idea of a future-to-come and thereby produce "a contemporary us" (2019, p. 3), as well as the idea of who *we* can become. These future-making practices create a certain teleology by telling only one desirable future. Therefore, future-making and development practices are consequently closely related and must be understood as attempts "to gain control over the future and reduce uncertainty" (Müller-Mahn, 2019, n.p.). According to Wiegink (2018), a temporal perspective on the extraction–development nexus is therefore particularly apt to uncover how (future) extractive projects are experienced and envisioned. In his studies about the smelter road in Zambia, Kesselring (2018), for example, showed that even when plans are still uncertain they may already affect social behaviour and actors may start to act in anticipation of future events.

To analyse the narratives that mobilise the protest against bauxite mining at Atewa Forest, I will refer to narrative analysis, identifying the main stories that are created. According to Dietz and Engels (2020), narratives create a link between structural changes and social action. Therefore, I will analyse different stories, articulated through social media, press releases, or public protest. Besides, I used interviews with the local NGO A Rocha Ghana conducted in their main office in Accra as well as the regional office at Keybi, where I also conducted participant observation. I participated in a meeting with the self-organised Concerned Citizens of Atewa Landscape, where they discussed several strategies. Furthermore, I conducted a group interview with the members of this organisation. On the other side, looking at the government perspective, I did informal interviews with the Ministry of Land and Resources in Ghana, the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as with the Minerals Commission. Additionally, I analysed the political agenda of President Akufo-Addo's Ghana Beyond Aid, as well as speeches by the president. I will finally argue that the political agenda Ghana Beyond Aid should be understood not only as a narrative but also as a future-making practice. Therefore, I argue to focus more on 'time' in political ecology in order to understand how governments craft powerful legitimations for their actions.

3 | ATEWA FOREST: A CONTESTED TERRITORY

Mining at Atewa Forest is not a new idea. Ayivor and Gordon (2012) point out that mining activities by unlicensed individuals and groups are increasing and causing serious problems for communities (see also Hilson & Nyame, 2006; Owusu et al., 2018). The status of a national park should protect the ecosystem of the forest for future generations and end the discussions about mining in this area. Until 2016, this process was already far developed. However, in 2016 the opposition National Patriotic Party (NPP) won the elections, promising new jobs from a nationwide industrialisation, including bauxite mining at Atewa. When Akufo-Addo (NPP) became president in January 2017, the government withdrew the plans to upgrade the Atewa Forest to a National Park.

The bauxite deposits at Atewa Forest (see Figure 1) are covered by tropical forest. This implies that the forest needs to be logged completely if open pit mines are to be built (Schep et al., 2016). Like most extractive industries, bauxite mining (usually opencast mines) has significant effects on the natural environment like degradation or severe disruption of local wildlife and rivers. One of the by-products that is created during the process of refining bauxite into alumina is a waste product mostly known as red mud (Ingulstad et al., 2013). The alkaline constituents in the red mud pose severe and alarming environmental problems, e.g., soil or water pollution (Rai et al., 2017). According to Ingulstad et al. (2013), the mining process generates 10 tons of waste rock and 3 tons of toxic red mud to produce 1 ton of aluminium. Consequently, environmentalists as well as local officials criticise the plans for bauxite mining in Atewa Forest. They fear deforestation, water pollution, and other environmental risks that will especially affect the local population. The forest functions as the source of three important rivers – the Densu, Birim, and Ayensu. Thus, regional environmental destruction might lead to heavy pollution of these rivers. The Densu River belongs to the coastal river system of Ghana and is one of the two main sources of water supply for the Accra urban area (Schep et al., 2016). According to the Ghana Wildlife Society (2018), over 5 million Ghanaians depend on the water from these three rivers. Hence, society calls for the protection of the forest and promotes different options like ecotourism. A group calling themselves Concerned Citizens of Atewa Landscape was formed in 2018 to prevent bauxite mining in the forest. It consists of civil society organisations, youth groups, interfaith groups, farmer-related associations, opinion leaders, and community leaders. The NGO A Rocha Ghana is also an initiator that promotes protest against the government plans. A Rocha Ghana was involved in the plans to declare Atewa Forest a national park. Along with a study by Schep et al. (2016), the plans were further developed and the government was willing to proceed to protect Atewa Forest.

4 | RESULTS

While the Ghana Integrated Bauxite and Aluminium Development Authority Bill (established 2018) does not particularly name any locations where bauxite should be mined, the Ghana Integrated Aluminium Development Corporation (GIADEC, 2020), which has the mandate to develop and promote an integrated aluminium industry in Ghana, highlights three locations for possible bauxite mining: the existing mines in Awaso, Nyinahin-Mpasaso, and Kyebi (also known as Kibi or Kebi). The mining plans at Kebi are especially contested. The NGOs involved are not in general against mining or the political agenda Ghana Beyond Aid, but are against mining at Atewa Forest. This is a challenge for the protesting NGOs because they are agreeing to the government's vision of industrialisation and development in general, but are fighting the same arguments on the ground, particularly at Atewa Forest.

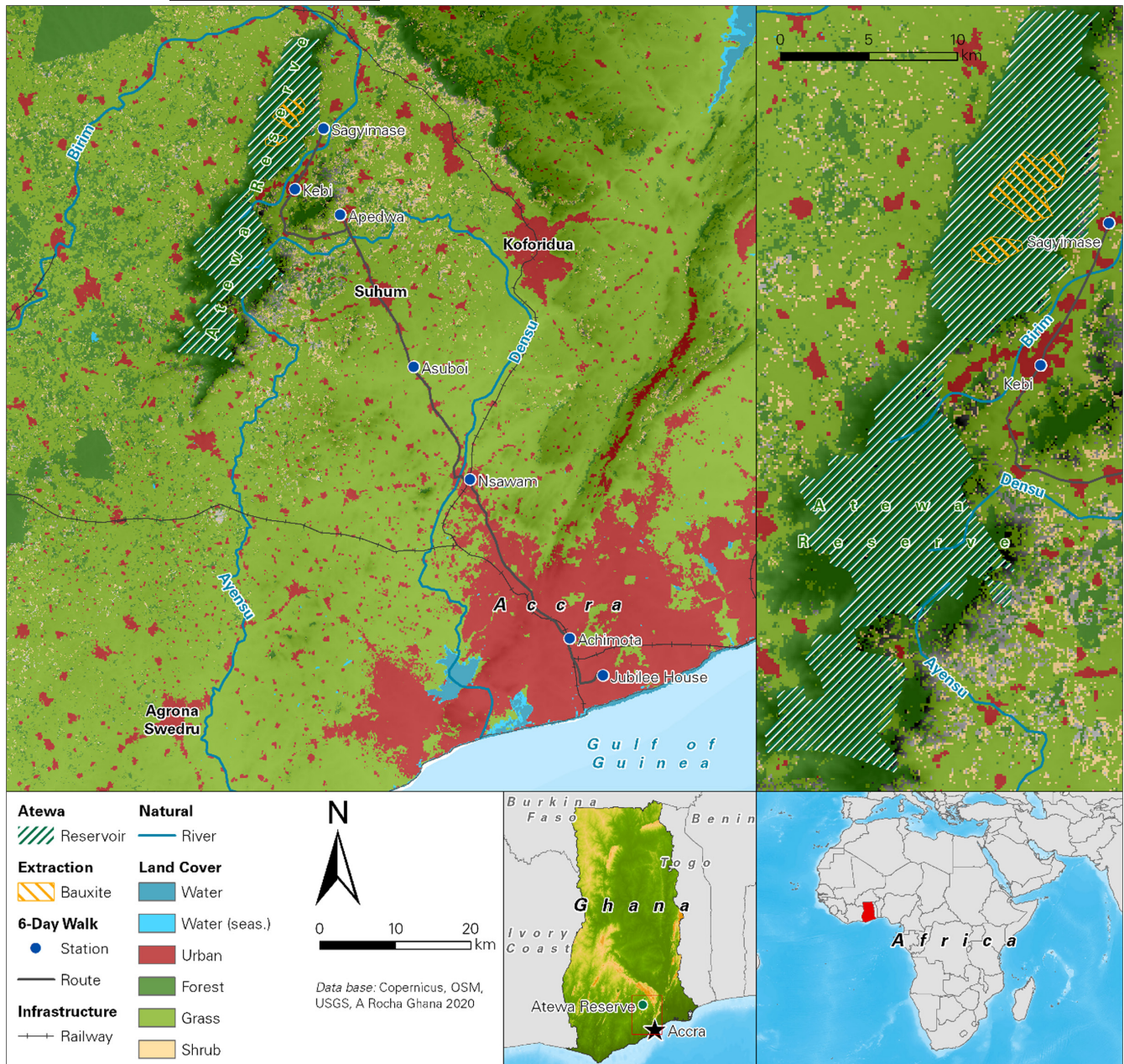


FIGURE 1 Atewa Forest Reserve study area, in the Eastern Region, Ghana

Source: Authors

4.1 | Narratives from the social movements

In June 2017, when Ghanaians officially entered a memorandum of understanding with China that included the further development of Ghana's bauxite resources, the leading NGO A Rocha Ghana posted on social media: "The Government of Ghana just traded our water, our culture, and heritage to the Chinese and as is expected, the Chinese have also accepted." This was followed by the statement: "The Government of Ghana just traded the source of water for over 5 million Ghanaians to the Chinese." In a press conference in July 2017, the local NGOs referred to a study about "The Economics of Atewa Forest Range" (Schep et al., 2016), which was subtitled "Living water from the mountain, protecting Atewa water resources." The study also highlights the water issue, showing a map which especially draws attention to the connection of Accra and the Atewa Forest through the Densu River. This study appears to be the main document the social movement refers to and which legitimises the environmental justice narrative. Tittor and Toledo López (2020) refer to that as producing counter-expertise and knowledge.

The movement also published an open letter they wrote to the Chinese Ambassador in Ghana in 2018. The story about the Chinese activities that pollute the environment takes up a global discourse about the risks of China's investments in Africa. At that time, it was neither clear nor agreed who exactly should mine at Atewa Forest. The so-called Sinohydro Deal even points out that Ghana sets up the conditions for developing an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry. However, international newspapers picked up this narrative, such as the article by *Foreign Policy* (Gbadamosi, 2020), and the Washington Post (2019) addressed both perspectives in its article: “Mining Ghana's bauxite would bring in billions from China. But it could also taint the water for 5 million people.”

However, more central was the narrative about the water bodies being polluted. The first public protest that was organised by A Rocha Ghana was a six-day walk from Keybi (Atewa Forest) to the capital Accra in March 2018. The walk ended on World Water Day (22 March 2018) in front of Jubilee House (the Presidential office). The groups symbolically referred to water pollution as a crucial issue if mining takes place at Atewa Forest and called on action concerning Sustainable Development Goal number 6 (Water and Sanitation). In June 2019, another march took place, called “March for Atewa, Forest and Water.” The water narrative made it very simple to understand that bauxite mining at Atewa Forest will not only have impacts on small villages but also on the capital. As mentioned by one interviewee, suddenly it was not only an issue of some people living in the periphery, but it was something that also concerned the people in the capital. However, as protests and mobilisation had not been successful yet, A Rocha Ghana sued the government. The organisation claimed that “mining bauxite in the forest violates ‘the right to life and dignity as enshrined in articles 13 and 15 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana’” (A Rocha, 2020, n.p.).

4.2 | Ghana Beyond Aid and the “making” of a resource

According to Conde (2017), governments react differently to protest against mining projects, depending on how dependent the country is on mining. While bauxite is not an important resource for Ghana's industry, its importance is produced and embedded in a larger vision of a nationwide industrialisation. In addition, Conde (2017) points out that common responses by governments are usually regulations. For example, in the case of El Salvador, the government created a moratorium on extraction due to social pressure (Bebbington & Bebbington, 2011).

However, in the early stage of the conflict about mining at Atewa, there was no active discussion or response by government officials. President Akufo-Addo directly referred to the case only a few times. During the Sustainable Ocean Industries Conference in 2019, Akuffo-Addo declared that this issue could be solved with new technologies used in the bauxite industry, avoiding disturbance of wildlife. In December 2019, during a media encounter, the president affirmed the project at all three locations, because it finances infrastructure across the country. The developing of an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry has since 2016 been a state-promoted idea around the promise to finance huge infrastructure with the proceeds of revenue from bauxite. The legitimisation of this project goes hand in hand with its embeddedness in the political agenda Ghana Beyond Aid. In 2017, at the 5th Africa CEOs Forum, Ghana's President Akufo-Addo announced, “We want to build a Ghana Beyond Aid; a Ghana which looks to the use of its own resources” (Communications Bureau, 2017, n.p.) and outlined an agenda that he introduced in 2018 during his speech marking the 61st Day of Independence.

The Ghana Beyond Aid vision is about the idea of transforming Ghana from an “underdeveloped country to a confident and self-reliant nation” (Government of Ghana, 2019, n.p.) and is built on five goals: a wealthy, inclusive, sustainable, empowered, and resilient Ghana, abbreviated as a WISER Ghana. In February 2019, a charter committee outlined the four main priorities of the Ghana Beyond Aid initiative: (1) industrialisation, (2) agriculture, (3) corruption, and (4) education. Ghana Beyond Aid is designed to provide money, jobs, and raw materials to reduce poverty nationwide. Ghana Beyond Aid appears to be more than just a political agenda, it is “a national and non-partisan call to harness effectively our own resources and deploy them effectively and efficiently for rapid economic and social transformation” (Government of Ghana, 2019, n.p.). Bauxite extraction is not only a necessary but also a seemingly unavoidable step towards the achievement of socio-economic development, as proclaimed in a billboard of President Akufo-Addo (see Figure 2). In his speech marking the 61st Day of Independence, Akufo Addo calculated the benefits of these promises:

On the world market, bauxite in its raw form is worth about \$42 per metric ton. Processing it just one stage further into alumina oxide will fetch twice that amount. Refining the alumina oxide into alumina will increase the value by seven times, and smeltered aluminum fetches one hundred-fold what it gets in the raw state. (Akufo-Addo, 2018, n.p.)



FIGURE 2 Statement of President Akufo-Addo on his social media channels (2018)

The importance of the integrated bauxite–aluminium industry is also linked to the so-called Sinohydro Deal. The Chinese company Sinohydro builds infrastructure in Ghana and is repaid with the revenue from selling refined bauxite (alumina or aluminium):

My government is going to implement an alternative financing module to leverage our bauxite reserves, in particular, to finance major infrastructure programs across Ghana. This will probably be the largest infrastructure program in Ghana's history without any addition to Ghana's debt stock. (Akufo-Addo, 2018, n.p.)

The Ghanaian Government defines priority infrastructure projects and therefore has the certainty that Ghana Beyond Aid projects are materialised. Bauxite mining has made itself a project without alternatives from the government's perspective. This is because (a) it enables Ghana to establish, and is literally the material ground for, an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry with the aim of exporting more manufactured product and (b) it enables a deal with the Chinese company Sinohydro and therefore loans to finance other projects of the Ghana Beyond Aid agenda.

This double dimension, of being the material foundation for Ghana Beyond Aid and being embedded within this vision, highlights the importance of executing this project. This double dimension leads to circumstances where the government argues that there is no alternative to executing the project. President Akufo-Addo repeatedly pointed out “come what may, we bring those resources to play” (Aluminium Insider, 2017, n.p.). In the framework, Dietz and Engels (2020) highlight that narratives are strategically transformed and adapted to different scales in order to gain legitimacy from scale-specific hegemonic discourses. In addition, Jasanoff and Kim (2015) point out that imaginaries work more powerfully through the global circulation of already powerful socio-technical imaginaries, which are re-embedded into local constellations of production and practice. Looking at this case, it reveals a significant similarity to modernisation theories and the development discourse.

In the early stages of the bauxite mining plans, there was simply the promoted idea of developing an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry and financing several infrastructure projects with the revenues from refined bauxite. I would argue that the legitimisation during that time was quite vague. According to Zimmermann (1933), resources are not, they *become*. With the Sinohydro Deal and the developed vision Ghana Beyond Aid in 2018, the project became important due to its importance for Ghana Beyond Aid. In this context, it developed a much more powerful legitimisation, being now coupled with the vision of a nationwide industrialisation, modernisation, and a self-reliant nation. Ironically, this is not the first time bauxite has been a symbol for industrialisation and sovereignty. During the first years of independence, the first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, had the vision of developing an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry to modernise the nation. However, this vision never became fully realised (see, for example, Miescher, 2014).

Bauxite mining at Atewa Forest is linked with future promises about development that make the extraction appear as something achievable and without alternatives. Looking at Ghana Beyond Aid as a future-making practice gives more attention to how the resource bauxite gains importance and its extraction legitimisation. This highlights that dimensions of time or future can be a beneficial perspective in political ecology. Future-making practices envision a desirable future and

thereby gain control over present ideas, narratives, and reactions. These practices are legitimated through different narratives (Knappe et al., 2019). While the concept of imaginaries must be understood as an analysis of present images of the future, future-making refers to a related set of socio-technical practices. Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015) describe it as a foresight process understood as a creative and exclusive set of practices in which a certain imaginary is produced. These practices aim “to seize a certain organizational or spatial unit present and past, constructed in the hermetic process of strategy, as a function of its potential futures” (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015, p. 26). Equally important in this context is the creation of hierarchies and through the legitimisation of certain truths, meanings, and knowledge, a particular order-of-things (Boelens et al., 2016; Holmes, 2014; Robbins, 2012). The future does not simply emerge; it is socially produced through practices.

5 | CONCLUSION

Müller-Mahn (2019) and Knappe et al. (2019) are generally more focused on the state or the government when it comes to future-making. However, on the one hand, future-making can also be a practice of resistance by empowering local people to develop their idea of futures. On the other hand, it is important to have a differentiated view when it is about “the government” or “the state” The political agenda Ghana Beyond Aid is linked to President Akufo-Addo. According to Gramsci (1992), the stabilisation of power relations is based on hegemony and a social group or class is hegemonic when “it is ‘leading’ and ‘dominant’” (1992, p. 136). In this struggle, the ruling classes and their intellectual leaders shape public opinion by using storylines which influence the cultural and political background (Gramsci, 2000).

Nevertheless, it appears that Ghana Beyond Aid is a powerful vision, because it relies on the global development discourse which Ziai labelled as “remarkably permanent” (2017, p. 264). Kumi elaborates on the public perceptions of Ghana Beyond Aid and highlights that it is “the desire of the governing elites to promote development through structural economic transformation by reducing their dependence on foreign aid” (2020, p. 87). A few days before the national election on 7 December 2020, Akufo-Addo addressed the people in Nyinahin and repeated his promise: “The Ghana integrated Bauxite and Aluminium Development Authority will soon be complete for the mining of the bauxite, out of which an industrial revolution would emerge to bring money, jobs and development to Nyinahin” (GhanaWeb, 2020, n.p.). This finally shows that the government avoids dealing with or confronting protesters’ narratives and instead holds on to its own produced future, which appears to be without alternative. Meanwhile, despite COVID-19, the Ghana Youth Environmental Movement organised the #voteAtewa campaign 21 days before election day, raising public awareness through protests and social media posts on environmental issues and reminding everyone that it is about *their* future as well.

This paper, as part of a project that looks at structures, actors, and narratives in the conflict about bauxite mining at Atewa Forest in Ghana, tried to answer three questions concerning the dimension of narratives. As stated at the start of the paper, I would argue that the local protesters and NGOs fighting against bauxite mining at the forest are drafting their narrative around the aspect of environmental justice by referring to the right of access to clean water. In addition, biodiversity and wildlife are always part of this argument. However, it appears that water is a topic more relevant for everyone, including for people living in the capital Accra. Therefore, this narrative mobilises more collective action as it addresses more people. In addition, the narrative of Chinese influence and getting access to resources was also important in the beginning. The longer the protests continue and the more publicised details about the deal between Sinohydro and the government become, the less this narrative is used. The second question concentrated on the government’s agenda, Ghana Beyond Aid.

The paper elaborated on how the plans for bauxite extraction are being embedded within this agenda. Simultaneously, this agenda still heavily relies on the development of an integrated bauxite–aluminium industry, as the revenue from this industry will finance the Sinohydro Deal, which finances infrastructure promised by Ghana Beyond Aid. Therefore, the bauxite extraction appears more and more as something without alternatives. In addition, it is coupled with the vision of a self-reliant nation. This leads to the third question. I would argue, that time, temporalities, and future provide new perspectives for political ecology. In political conflicts, time can be used strategically. Control over time is a medium of hierarchic power and governance. Future-making practices create a certain teleology by telling only one desirable future. Therefore, they implicitly or explicitly refer to future situations by simultaneously outlining how to get there. As mentioned, narratives are not powerful *per se* and they refer to context-related social actions and events. In contrast, I would argue that the seemingly unavoidable path to mine bauxite is better understood from the standpoint of future-making practices. It still admits that it is something socially produced and political but it deconstructs the processes that created a powerful legitimisation. It allows understanding of “how future gets translated into space” (Müller-Mahn, 2019, n.p.). Future-making and the creation of a national imaginary are about how to demarcate space, legitimate extraction, as well as a new order of the territory. As Hinojosa et al.

(2015, p. 105) argue, future-making practices consider transformation from a geographical perspective and are about appropriate strategies for territorial development and futures to which residents might aspire. This practice is important to create a single development path that only needs to be managed. At this point, reaching a certain future is becoming a question of managing the present; furthermore, the created future legitimises present practices.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Secondary data that support the findings of this study are openly available.

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