

RESOURCE EXTRACTION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN AFRICA

THEO VAN DER MERWE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abundant natural resources, swathes of unprotected territory and porous borders make resource extraction an attractive source of wealth for opportunistic extremist groups in Africa – most notably al-Shabaab, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Janjaweed militia. This policy insight paper outlines the extent to which each group is engaged in the extraction of natural resources and the degree to which this activity is funding the group. In the case of al-Shabaab, it appears that the funds it derives from natural resources are due to the taxation of charcoal rather than extraction itself. The LRA, on the other hand, seems to be relying heavily on poaching and ivory sales for capital. The Janjaweed has acquired considerable funds through artisanal mines in Darfur, a region rich in gold deposits. Lastly, research suggests that Boko Haram receives little or no revenues directly from natural resource extraction.

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic resurgence of and disastrous high-profile attacks by violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and al-Shabaab have magnified post-9/11 fears of global terrorism, and firmly re-centred violent extremism as a policy concern for the international community. The deadly practices and virulent influence of these groups present a complicated challenge for policymakers seeking to stem the rise of terrorism. This policy insight paper

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explores an avenue that has received some attention, but around which there has been little synthesis of information: the extent to which violent extremist groups in Africa are being funded by natural resource extraction. Such revenue streams are investigated across four of the continent's most prominent groups: al-Shabaab, the LRA, the Janjaweed militia and Boko Haram.

AL-SHABAAB

Al-Shabaab is a jihadist terrorist group that has been operating in East Africa since 2006. The group, an offshoot of the since-disbanded Islamic Courts Union, is engaged in ongoing combat with the Somali government and the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In 2015 it was estimated that the group had between 7 000 and 9 000 soldiers, up from the 2013 estimate of 5 000 soldiers.¹ Despite the recent growth in numbers, as well as a spike in high-profile attacks over the last few years, the group has lost considerable sympathy and territory – most importantly the port city of Kismayo in 2012.² Its resilience can partly be explained by its complex financing system. Al-Shabaab pledged formal allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2012, following which it has been provided with training and resources.³ It also received significant contributions from the Somali diaspora and, according to the UN, from the Somaliland and Eritrean governments.⁴ Other resources have been acquired through theft, particularly of media equipment, vehicles and other useful items from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in the country.

It is difficult to ascertain what proportion of al-Shabaab's funding is derived from resource extraction, as almost all of its wealth is managed through unofficial channels such as the hawala system, making it nearly untraceable. It is clear, however, that charcoal taxation produces significant revenues for al-Shabaab, particularly as remittances from the Somali diaspora have been decreasing.⁵ Despite the group's broad and sophisticated financial network, this drop in remittances has seen it relying more on activities such as resource taxation, with a joint report published by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and Interpol finding that the taxation of charcoal products and exports is al-Shabaab's largest source of wealth in the region, generating profits of approximately \$250 million in 2013/14.⁶

This illicit taxation is great cause for concern, as charcoal, mostly produced in the Jubaland region, is Somalia's second largest export after livestock – the charcoal trade has tripled since 2009, reaching \$779 million in 2013.⁷ It is thus clear that while it is difficult to ascertain the scale of the charcoal industry in Somalia, al-Shabaab's control over the trade is significant, given that its profits constitute close to a third of the total revenue for charcoal exports from the country. Moreover, decreased charcoal revenues resulting from lower export volumes have led al-Shabaab to raise the taxation rate, with trucks in the Lower Juba region being taxed up to \$1,500 per journey.⁸

A recent UN Security Council (UNSC) report found that most of the taxed charcoal is exported to the United Arab Emirates from Kismayo and Buur Gabo.⁹ Additionally, approximately 150–200 dhows of charcoal are being exported from Somalia each year, with a retail value of between \$171–228 million. There is evidence, however, that the group is attempting to diversify as a result of the implementation of a charcoal ban by the UN, a positive signal for policymakers.¹⁰

This illicit trade and taxation also ties into a larger environmental concern in the region, namely deforestation. This has largely been the result of the charcoal industry's immense growth over the two decades since the collapse of the Somali state, which resulted in many losing their jobs and turning to charcoal production as an alternative, as it requires no skills or training. This is highly destructive in terms of the environment and is causing the large-scale deforestation of the country's acacia trees, with the average family requiring five to seven sacks of charcoal per month.¹¹ While there is no recent data on the scale of this deforestation, data from the late 1990s provided by the UNEP estimated that the deforestation rate was 35 000ha of land a year, with an average density of 60 trees per hectare. This means that in the last five years of the 1990s, 175 000ha of land would have been cleared, a figure probably dwarfed by the rate today.¹²

Al-Shabaab's profits from these activities have not gone unnoticed. A 2005 UNEP report claimed that al-Shabaab was colluding with the Kenyan Defence Force (KDF) contingent of AMISOM, which acted as brokers for the group. According to the report, members of the charcoal industry and NGO sources indicated that the KDF received \$2 per bag of charcoal that it allowed to be exported from Kismayo.¹³ This illicit trade, the report claimed, was funding al-Shabaab's attempts to overthrow AMISOM. President Uhuru Kenyatta has since denied these allegations. The latest UNSC report claims that decreased revenues from charcoal following al-Shabaab's loss of the port city of Kismayo in 2012 have led the group to rely on taxes on other goods moving through the country. This includes sugar, agricultural products and livestock, with sugar alone accounting for up to \$12–18 million a year.¹⁴

Al-Shabaab's involvement in natural resource extraction is not limited to Somalia. The group has also entered the illegal mineral trade networks in the region and has now allegedly joined the Allied Democratic Forces–National Army for the Liberation of Uganda in smuggling minerals from North Kivu, according to the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).¹⁵ While no data is available yet on the extent to which this is funding the group, it is symptomatic of a larger trend in the DRC. The claim warrants further investigation by international organisations and stakeholders, particularly as up to 98% of the DRC's extracted gold leaves the country via smuggling, undercutting any potential gains for the government.¹⁶

However, al-Shabaab may be profiting from a misdirection of attention towards false leads – particularly claims that it is engaging in the widespread poaching of ivory. These allegations, initially promulgated by an Elephant Action League (EAL) report stating that 40% of the group's funds are derived from poaching, have gained considerable traction in civil society and among governments since its release in 2013. However, the EAL's claims seem to be largely based on spurious evidence, according to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).¹⁷ It has been argued that the lack of any data on the alleged ivory trade flows across Somalia also casts doubt on these claims, particularly when so much data has been found by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea on the illicit trade in sugar and charcoal crossing the country.¹⁸ Additionally, RUSI points out that the EAL report based all of its claims on one unnamed source within al-Shabaab – which is further cause for scepticism.

Allegations of involvement in the ivory trade span two activities: poaching and trafficking. Misinformation has led to the group being accused in the media of

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engaging in one or the other, or both to varying degrees. Many of these allegations are based on Kenyan claims of poachers being of Somali nationality, which many often wrongly assume to mean they must therefore be linked to al-Shabaab in some way. However, most of al-Shabaab's strongholds in Kenya are in regions devoid of elephants, or which have populations so small that it would be impossible for the group to be earning significant revenues from ivory. Any engagement in the ivory trade is therefore likely to be sporadic and opportunistic, not systematic, and should be treated as such by policymakers and the international community.

JANJAWEEED MILITIA

The Janjaweed is a militia that operates in Darfur, western Sudan and eastern Chad. The group consists of nomadic Sudanese Arab tribes, most prominently the Abbala, who promulgate ideas of Arab supremacy over the settled population, whom they consider to have taken on a more African identity distinct from their own. The group emerged out of Muammar Gaddafi's Islamic Legion, which he created in 1972 as a tool to unify and Arabise the region. The Janjaweed first appeared as an offshoot of the Islamic Legion in 1988, after Libya was defeated by a US- and France-backed Chad. The group retreated into Darfur, where its members were tolerated by the Sudanese government as Arab partisans who pursued local agendas of controlling land. Eventually they were armed by Sudan, which faced an insurgency in the region in 2000.¹⁹ The group, in conjunction with President Omar al-Bashir's forces, then went on to commit what the UNSC deemed to be a genocidal attempt to erase all African tribes from the region.²⁰ This would result in the deaths of at least 200 000 people and the displacement of 1.5 million.²¹

Recent research by the Institute for Security Studies has found that transnational criminal networks – including the Janjaweed – are increasingly engaging in the extraction of resources from the DRC.²² The potential gains for such groups are high, as the country has the largest reserves of T3 minerals (tungsten, coltan and tin – all used extensively in electronics such as phones and laptops) – with the total value of its untapped minerals estimated to be \$24 trillion.²³ The Janjaweed and other extremist groups have taken advantage of an informal, poorly regulated extractive sector, with an estimated 10 million informal jobs being provided by artisanal and small-scale mines.²⁴ The DRC government hopes that its having joined the Organisation for the Harmonisation of Business Law in Africa in 2010 will gradually reduce the opportunities presented by this lack of regulation.²⁵ The government also runs the PROMINES programme, which has helped to bring some regulation to the industry. This programme, with funding from the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development, seeks to improve the legal status, working practices and economic returns of artisanal mining in the country, investing \$90 million a year towards the sector's improvement.²⁶ It is important to note that while it is not yet clear to what extent revenues from illicit mining activities in the DRC are funding the Janjaweed, the region lies well beyond its usual territory of western Sudan and eastern Chad. This may be indicative of a desire to expand geographically and may warrant further investigation by international and state actors in the region.

In addition to this, the Janjaweed has appropriated gold reserves and timber in the Darfur region. Darfur's natural wealth makes it crucially important to Sudan's

economy, and it is home to between one-quarter and one-third of the country's livestock.²⁷ South Darfur contributed about 15% of Sudan's total gum arabic production, which generates national revenues of \$50 million a year.²⁸ Timber extraction has also led to the steady deforestation of the region at a rate of over 1% a year from 1973–2006.²⁹ Musa Hilal, a leader of the Janjaweed, created an opposition organisation called the Sudanese Awakening Revolutionary Council in 2014 to engage in a formal political process to appropriate control of the considerable gold deposits in the Darfur region. This has occurred in the context of an on-going gold rush since 2005, particularly in the Jebel Amer area, with artisanal mining accounting for 85% of the gold extracted since the start of the gold rush, according to the Sudanese government.³⁰

Currently, most of Sudan's gold is sourced from artisanal mines, with more than 750 000 Sudanese independently prospecting for gold across 100 sites.³¹ Hilal's organisation took control of the area by force and was therefore able to exploit its vast number of artisanal mines, providing a further means to fund the Janjaweed. Highlighting the scale of this undertaking, a leaked UN report claimed that Hilal earned \$54 million a year from the trade, which put \$123 million in total into the pockets of armed groups in Darfur. In addition to the destabilising effects of this activity, the surge in artisanal mining has led to several casualties due to the precarious nature of the work, with one collapsed mine claiming the lives of 37, and another mine with a depth of 60m collapsing and trapping 95 workers.³²

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LORD'S RESISTANCE ARMY

The LRA is a cult extremist rebel group operating in southern Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan, the DRC and, until 2006, Uganda. The primary objective of the group, led by the infamous self-declared prophet Joseph Kony, is to overthrow the Ugandan government and establish a multiparty democracy characterised by Acholi nationalism and the strict rule of the Ten Commandments. The group has gained international notoriety for its mass abduction of children, who are forced to become child soldiers, and women, who are made slaves. This led to the International Criminal Court and Interpol issuing arrests for the group in 2005 and 2006, charging its leaders with crimes against humanity and war crimes. Since the LRA's initial insurgency it has reportedly forced well over 10 000 children into combat. The group steadily grew weaker over the years due to an internationally coordinated counterinsurgency and large-scale defections, dwindling from its peak of several thousand fighters in 2003 to roughly 200–400 today.³³ As a result, it has lost large swathes of territory and is now mostly restricted to areas in the DRC, from where it poaches ivory – its main source of income – and Sudan, where it allegedly trades the ivory with the Sudanese military. However, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees expressed concern that the group was beginning to regain momentum in 2012.³⁴ In 2015 the LRA was active in the CAR, DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan's South Darfur and the disputed Kafia Kingi enclave. That year it kidnapped 612 people in 203 attacks – thus there were fewer attacks than in 2014, but more abductions.³⁵

Reports by *National Geographic*, the Enough Project and UNEP all indicate that the LRA relies heavily on the illicit ivory trade for funding, mostly derived from national parks in the DRC. This is likely due to the group's isolated standing – it

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has substantially less external operational support than al-Shabaab, for example, which benefits from diaspora groups and international supporters of global jihad. Ivory is a lucrative resource for such armed groups, selling for about EUR³⁶ 300 (\$324) in the DRC in 2015, according to the DRC government.³⁷ According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, 43 elephants were killed in the Garamba National Park between January and May in 2016.³⁸ Other places where LRA poaching has been reported is Okapi National Park and parts of southern CAR.³⁹ Upon interviewing several LRA defectors, the Enough Project learnt that the ivory poached from Garamba National Park is eventually taken to Kony's hideout in the Kafia Kingi enclave in Sudan.

The Sudanese military trades ivory for arms with the LRA, according to a former sergeant of the LRA, Michael Onen.⁴⁰ Kafia Kingi is a disputed territory in Darfur that is controlled by Sudan and has widely been identified as a Kony hideout by international NGOs, LRA defectors and AU military forces. The Sudanese government, according to these sources, is therefore actively colluding with the LRA and its illicit extractive and trade activities.

Onen added that when he oversaw an ivory poaching mission, he was told to first take the collected ivory from Garamba to a rendezvous in the CAR, and from there to a market town called Songo – close to the Sudanese Armed Forces' garrison in Dafaq. Once in Songo, the ivory is traded with the Sudanese military for salt, sugar and arms. This route was confirmed when *National Geographic* reporter Bryan Christy's GPS-embedded tusks were being moved, travelling the same route and eventually making their way to Khartoum.⁴¹ Sudan, according to the report, supplies ivory to Egypt and is the recipient of substantial Chinese infrastructure investment. Such investment brings with it workers from China who, according to the Chinese ambassador to Tanzania, have occasionally presented problems for Sino-African relations due to ivory smuggling.

It is important to note, however, that the LRA is not the largest culprit in the poaching of elephants in the area. Others include traditional poachers (members of local communities who have long lived off the income derived from elephants), South Sudanese armed groups made up of former Sudan People's Liberation Army officers (but not Janjaweed militia) and opportunistic individual Congolese soldiers. Another common route along which the ivory is smuggled is to the border town of Ariwara in the DRC and its neighbour on the Ugandan side of the border, Arua – two important hubs in the ivory trade.⁴² From these towns the ivory is transported by truck to Kampala to be sold to bigger traders. Some of this ivory is then taken to Mombasa in Kenya, while another portion is smuggled out of the country via Entebbe International Airport. This route does not seem to be mentioned in relation to the LRA, however.

The LRAs involvement in the trade could destabilise the region, despite its numbers having dwindled significantly over the years. According to former LRA commander Dominic Ongwen, the Seleka rebel coalition group was able to overthrow President François Bozizé of the CAR in 2013 as a direct result of the profits it had made by selling ivory. Kony's goal, according to Ongwen, is similar: to obtain as much ivory as possible to survive, if he is unable to overthrow the Ugandan government.

FIGURE 1 THE LRA'S IVORY SMUGGLING ROUTE FROM GARAMBA TO KAFIA KINGI

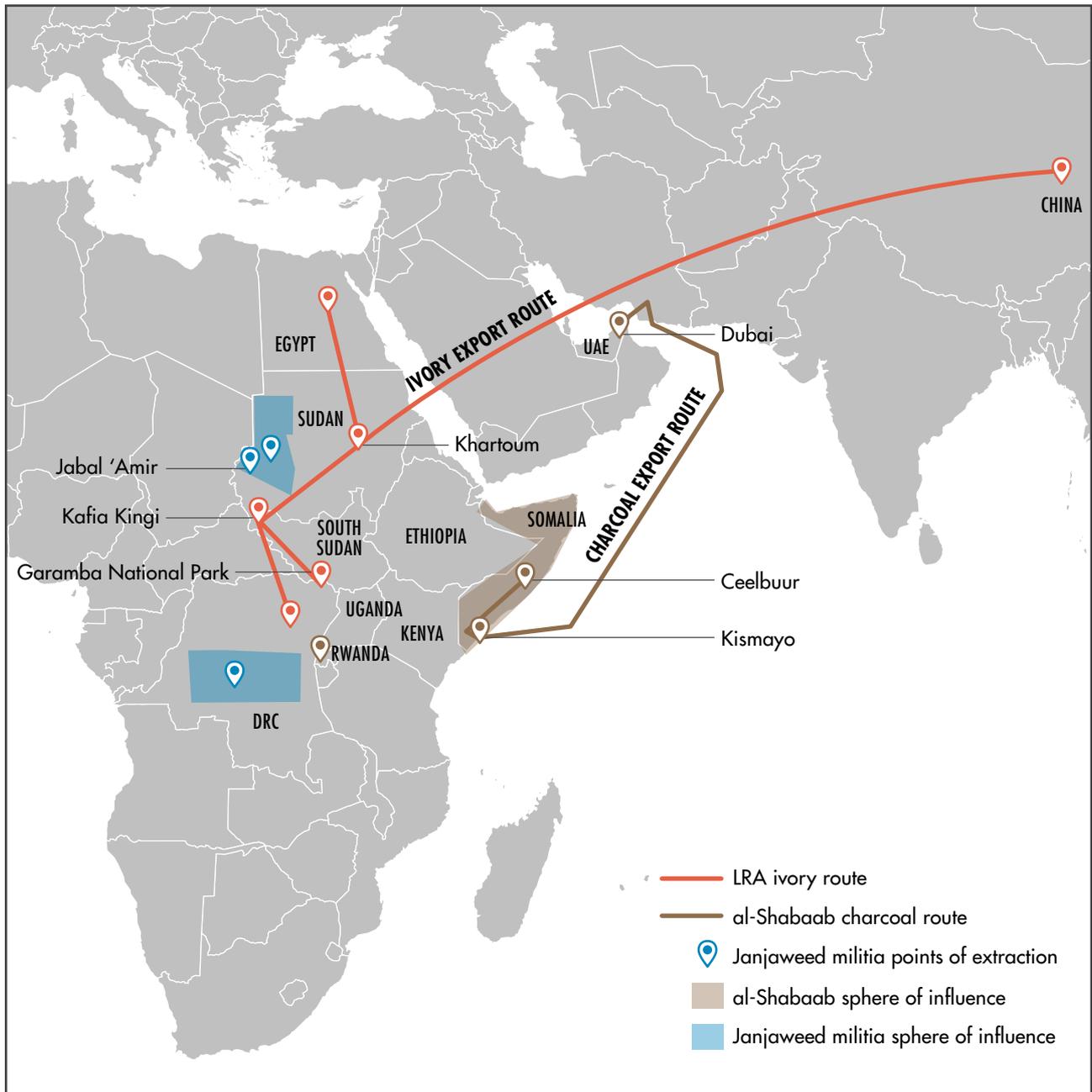


Source: Cakaj L, 'Tusk Wars: Inside the LRA and the Bloody Business of Ivory', Enough Project, 2015, p. 11

BOKO HARAM

Boko Haram is a militant Islamist extremist group based primarily in north-eastern Nigeria, and which has also been active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon since 2002. Although the group initially pledged its allegiance to al-Qaeda, it formally announced its new allegiance to the IS in March 2015. Boko Haram became increasingly powerful between 2010 and 2015 and was ranked the deadliest terror group in 2015 by the Global Terrorism Index, with over 6 000 reported casualties so far. However, it suffered several territorial losses in 2016, and has seen factional fighting between members who support IS-appointed leader Abu-Musab al-Barnawi and those supporting original leader Abubakar Shekau. As a result it has splintered into two opposing factions that have reportedly engaged in armed clashes with one another.

FIGURE 2 MACRO-VIEW OF THE ROUTES THE EXTRACTED NATURAL RESOURCES TRAVEL, AND THE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE OF THE GROUPS INVOLVED



Source: Compiled by author

Although the group killed 244 people in the first quarter of 2016, this was its lowest quarterly death toll in five years, indicative of its slipping hold on power. Major General Lucky Irabor of the Nigerian army claims that since August 2016 the militants control only a few villages and towns near Lake Chad and in the Sambisa forest. If counter-insurgency efforts are strengthened the group's defeat may thus be near.

The group's main sources of revenue have been taxation, black market dealings (particularly slavery), local and international benefactors and links to well-funded groups in the Middle East such as al-Qaeda (while still allied to it, before 2015). Despite its considerable wealth there seems to be no evidence that Boko Haram engages in natural resource extraction. This is primarily because there are few natural resources to be found in the northern parts of Nigeria, with most of the country's wealth lying in the southern Delta region. Boko Haram, therefore, has little opportunity to involve itself in resource extraction.

CONCLUSION

Natural resources remain an important source of funding for violent extremist groups in Africa. In the case of al-Shabaab, the urgency of tackling these sources of revenue – which bring violence, destruction and underdevelopment to al-Shabaab's areas of operation – is underlined by the difficulties encountered in dismantling illicit international financial flows in the form of remittances. Cutting revenues from its illicit natural resource trade remains one of the more direct paths to halting the group's expansion. Additionally, linkages between the illegal mineral trade in the DRC and extremist groups require close monitoring. Both al-Shabaab and the Janjaweed militia have allegedly been involved in illegal mining and the minerals trade in the DRC, and there seems to be a lack of coordinated effort to address this. Addressing these forms of natural resource extraction by the groups investigated here will likely require a two-pronged approach, whereby international organisations such as the UN and the AU maintain their military counter-insurgencies while the communities in which they operate are empowered to engage in official and legal economic activity. This will require any engagement in the illicit trade activities of these groups to be disincentivised, thereby reducing their longevity.

In addition, it is equally important that misinformation does not penetrate policy interventions and result in the potential misdirection of funding, as occurred with the popularisation of the al-Shabaab ivory narrative. Such misinformation poses a serious risk by diverting resources and effort away from proven and tangible revenue streams, allowing these groups a dangerous window of opportunity to grow their operations. To this end, it is in the interest of policymakers and researchers to thoroughly investigate claims of linkages between natural resource extraction and extremist groups, and promote and disseminate legitimate findings.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Governance of Africa's Resources Programme (GARP) is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SAIIA gratefully acknowledges this support.

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MAY 2017

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