

ULANGA, TANZANIA: WHEN GRAPHITE MINING THREATENS LIVELIHOODS AND RIGHTS

We are shouting for future generations!

(Ulanga Faith-Based leader)

The Ulanga district of southern Tanzania is a landscape of rivers, thick forests, fertile rice and maize fields, and ancestral places of worship. For generations, families here have lived from farming, forest products, and artisanal crafts like pottery. Land is at the centre of life: *"Life without land is not life. Land is everything."*

Graphite mining has disrupted this balance, bringing promises of development but leaving behind a trail of displacement, broken commitments, and human rights violations. Instead of empowerment, the community feels surrounded by outsiders, stripped of their voice, and criminalized for defending their home. *"Foreigners have come, they are destroying our land and our forests and our water sources, they are abusing our basic rights and putting us in detention for the crimes of defending our land,"* says an Ulanga faith based leader.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

The Ulanga community is overwhelmingly made up of smallholder farmers. Crops like maize, beans, and rice are central to livelihoods, while clay decorated by the same graphite that is at the heart of their disruption have long been used by women to make pottery for sale. Bamboo small-scale crafts used to supplement incomes. These practices are both economic and cultural, tied to forests, rivers, and soils that have been carefully stewarded for generations.

Community values are rooted in environmental respect, collective solidarity, and continuity of life through the land.

"In our home, there were thick forests, which were maintained by our elders and we respected life by maintaining the forests." Children grow up not only learning to farm but also to gather sustenance from their surroundings. These memories of abundance are now fading.

"Now our farm is no longer ours... our house is no longer there, we don't know where we will be taken." says an Ulanga faith-based leader.

ABOUT THE COMPANIES

Since 2012, the Tanzanian government has advanced plans for graphite mining in the Ulanga district. At the moment, there are three main projects, at different stages of implementation: the Mahenge, the Liandu, and the Epanko graphite projects.

The Mahenge Graphite Project – one of the largest flake graphite resources in the world – is owned by the Australian Black Rock Mining. Since 2021, the project is managed by the Faru Graphite Corporation joint venture, between Black Rock (84%) and the government of Tanzania (16%). Construction began in 2022 and the mine is expected to operate for over 30 years, with an annual production of 250,000 tonnes of high-purity graphite.

The open-pit Mahenge Liandu Graphite Project, meanwhile, is being developed by Armadale Capital, a London-listed natural resources company that acquired it from the Tanzanian company Graphite Advancement. The project is promoted as low-cost and long-life, yet similar to Mahenge, affected communities face challenges in negotiating fair compensation and express the need for resettlement to arable agricultural areas that avoid conflicts with natural reserves.

The Epanko mine is owned by the Australia-based company EcoGraf, formerly known as Kibaran. In 2023, EcoGraf incorporated Duma TanzGraphite Limited, creating a joint venture to develop and operate the project. EcoGraf holds an 84% stake in Duma TanzGraphite while the Tanzanian government owns a 16% free-carried interest.

The project has attracted several investors, including the German KfW IPEX-Bank, which has been providing advisory services for this project for almost a decade and it is currently mobilizing further funding. Further details about the Epanko project, and the role played by KfW, are available in the 2025 Coalition for Human Rights in Development report, "KfW: Irresponsible Banking".

In June 2025, EcoGraf announced that the European Union (EU) is also exploring support for the Epanko graphite project, as part of its efforts to strengthen its critical mineral supply chains. In particular, the EU is seeking to fund associated projects, such as the regional road corridor from Mahenge to the Dar Es Salaam port via the commercial hub of Ifakara.



PROJECT IMPACTS

The impacts of graphite mining operations in Ulanga are layered, severe, and deeply human. Families speak not only of lost land and livelihoods, but also of growing safety concerns, breaking apart of cultural practices, and the fear that now permeates everyday life.

What was once fertile ground sustaining generations has become a site of dispossession, broken promises, and repression by the state and the global north companies that own and operate the mines.

For most households, the upheaval began when their fertile lands were taken away and given over to the mines. Families who once grew maize, rice, beans, and vegetables, and kept livestock for food and income, were uprooted from productive farms and resettled on dry, barren soil where agriculture is nearly impossible. A paralegal working with the community resident described, *"People were moved from their fertile land to dry areas... where they cannot farm as before."* The loss of farming has not only produced hunger but stripped away community resilience and the ability to sustain households.

Women in particular have been deprived of traditional sources of livelihood. Pottery, once decorated with graphite and sold to provide household income, is no longer an option, while bamboo, used for weaving ungu plates common to every Tanzanian home, has become harder to collect. What was once a web of land-based practices sustaining families and culture has been systematically dismantled.

Residents in Ulanga stated that the relocation process was poorly planned and purposefully confusing. Each project, the Mahenge, the Liandu, and the Epanko requires community relocation but not all communities have been given new land to move to.

For instance, some community members affected by the Mahenge Graphite Project were paid out cash compensation and relocated to Idenki, 3 km from their original homes.

Others were told they would not be given cash compensation, but would be given new houses instead, and would receive rent and food money in the interim until their new houses are built. However, the housing construction for these 36 families stalled, and food and rent allowances that were initially provided were abruptly withdrawn. Families found themselves stranded, unable to return to their farmland and now without finances to continue paying for secure shelter. Some families tried to pay the rent on their own, others had no income to offer at all, falling into conflict with landlords.

The community told us of the story of one family consisting of a father and young son who, despite being listed for relocation, are still stranded in the deserted village soon to be consumed by the mine. The family now lives alone, described by neighbours as *"an island, surrounded by forests and grasses."* Their isolation has carried knock-on consequences, including when the child was bitten by a snake on the way to school. The community feels that this was a result of the family's isolation, surrounded by nothing but tall grass.



Credit: Canva stock picture

Children have borne a particularly heavy burden. In their previous home, they had access to school and health centres nearby. After the mine displaced them, these vital services were far from reach, turning daily routines into exhausting and often dangerous journeys. Parents explained that what children need most is simple: *“First of all, they must have a school which is accessible, health services accessible to them and to their community and to their mothers.”*

Instead, children walk long distances, risking snakebites and other dangers. Girls are especially vulnerable to harassment and exploitation on these routes. Meanwhile, mining has polluted the air and water, leaving children to grow up surrounded by dust and contamination. As one participant put it, *“With the mining, you know, there is a lot of air pollution. There is a lot of water pollution. So I think children are the most affected.”*

The destruction is not only material but cultural. Forests once protected by elders have been cleared by the mines to access the graphite underneath, rivers contaminated, and wetlands that sustained children with mushrooms and crabs have vanished.

Sacred sites, or ludewa, central to spiritual life and environmental stewardship, have been desecrated. Their loss is understood not only as ecological but as the collapse of a cultural system.

“If our places of worship (ludewa) are taken away, our environment is destroyed. Our traditional care for the environment is also destroyed, in general, our entire system of life is destroyed,” one community member explains.

The grief of this cultural rupture was expressed in poetry as well as testimony. In a verse shared during the interviews, participants declared: *“Ulanga ya minina yamito... ardhi ya mababu... lakini sisi tumesimama, hatuta kubali kuharibiwa.”* (*“Ulanga of mountains and rivers... land of our ancestors... but we are standing firm, we will not accept destruction.”*)

Alongside these material and cultural losses, people live under constant intimidation. From the earliest stages, villagers who resisted the project faced threats from authorities.

Families were warned that if they refused to move, they would be forcibly removed with nothing. Some were detained, others were shot at, and community morale was deliberately broken through fear. Leaders who continued to raise their voices were arrested and humiliated by local police, sent to jail to silence dissent.

"To the jail I have gone, I have seen the oppression, the humiliation, but I have to keep on pushing and look on what is next. And the desire is to see the victory," one woman activist testifies. Yet the risks remain extreme.

COMMUNITY RESISTANCE

Despite the very real concerns for personal safety and reprisals, resistance continues both through quiet defiance to open confrontation. While the government and company portray villagers as supportive of the mining project, the reality is far more complex: communities have consistently opposed displacement and exploitation, only to be silenced through coercion and fear.

Women have played a particularly prominent role: a female activist became a symbol of courage after she publicly challenged the district commissioner with hard questions about unfulfilled promises. Instead of addressing her concerns, he dismissed her with the words: *"You woman, just sit down."* Her bravery did not go unnoticed; interview participants described her confrontation as an act of defiance that inspired others.

Communities have also organized collectively to demand accountability and Free, Prior Informed Consent (FPIC). In Ulanga, villagers mobilized through their local government to challenge the withdrawal of rent and food support. Their collective pressure forced the company to reinstate rent assistance, even if food payments were not restored.

"If you are being noted that you are going against what government supports, you are going to disappear. And your history will end there," remarks a local faith-based leader vocal against the injustices.

In such a climate, public songs, slogans, or protests against the mine have all but disappeared. Still, religious leaders, women activists, and a handful of others continue to speak, even as the threat of disappearance or death hangs over them.

"[The community] mobilized themselves and met with the district commissioner... this was a collective action among the community group," one paralegal working with the community explained. This action is seen as a model for pushing further for land, housing, and fairer treatment. The paralegal went on to state that *"the communities' claim is to have FPIC or any other community agreement that will make them benefit from graphite"*.

The Ulanga communities' fight for justice is particularly difficult on those who resist, yet there is a simmering act of defiance. A poem, *Ulanga Si Dampo Tunapigania Atietu* ("Ulanga is Not a Dump, We Fight for Our Rights") was written by one of the community members after our interview as an act of political protest and raising voices for future generations. This poem is shared in full below, however one line stands out indicating what the community is fighting for:

***"The land of ancestors not the property of sudden strangers."
(Tunapaza sauti kwa vizazi vijavyo.)***

COMMUNITY ALTERNATIVES AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Despite forced displacement, fear, and loss, the communities of Ulanga have not stopped imagining alternatives. Their visions are rooted in cultural traditions of solidarity, dignity, and collective survival, standing in stark contrast to the extractive logic of mining. Children's needs are at the centre of this vision. Parents imagine a future where their children grow up in clean air, with access to education and healthcare, free from the pollution and dangers of mining. Women, too, see possibilities in reclaiming traditional livelihoods. Pottery, once decorated with graphite and sold in local markets, was a vital source of income and creativity. Bamboo weaving, used to make household plates known as ungu, was another. These crafts not only sustained families but also carried cultural meaning. Our discussions touched on the possibility of scaling up these activities with proper support and training in order to provide viable, sustainable alternatives to dependence on mining.

Beyond livelihoods, participants proposed new economic models rooted in existing traditions of giving. In Ulanga, neighbours contribute during births, weddings, and funerals through offering clothing, food, or other necessities. These acts of generosity, while meaningful, are often one-off. The proposal is to formalize this solidarity into community philanthropy: a system of pooling resources to fund collective needs, support livelihoods, and reduce poverty.

"We can transform through meaningful giving - establishing community philanthropy," one speaker suggested. Practices like Musaragambo (volunteering), where communities come together to build houses or complete major tasks, could be expanded into structured systems of mutual aid. *"Maybe we can capitalize on that, make it formal... I think that one can help the community and even can reduce poverty rather than giving without a meaning."*

Strategic advocacy also forms part of the community's hope. Some participants suggested targeting international financial flows that enable Mahenge Graphite's operations. *"If there is any company funding this project, they must stop it. Hoping that it will be at least a relief to the people."*

Cutting off external funding is seen as a way to reduce corporate power and slow down the project before full extraction begins. Others spoke of coexistence, if mining cannot be stopped, then it must at least be made just. Examples from Uganda, where oil pipeline projects channel funds to villages, are seen as models. *"How can we equitably share the benefits of mining?"*

Ultimately, hope is anchored in land, culture, and dignity. The community insists that relocation must ensure not just physical survival but cultural continuity: keeping families and kinship systems intact, with fertile land that sustains agricultural life.

As one speaker put it, *"Land is our office."* Without it, survival is impossible.



Credit: Canva stock picture

CONCLUSION

The story of Ulanga is not one of passive victims of extractivism but of communities caught in a struggle to defend life itself. The people's message is clear: *"Life without land is not life. LAND IS EVERYTHING."* From snakebites suffered because families were abandoned in isolation, to women demanding answers from officials who tell them to *"just sit down,"* the community's experiences reveal the human costs hidden behind glossy mining reports and global market projections.

Yet, even under threats of disappearance and jail, resistance has not been extinguished. Women, children, priests, and poets continue to speak, organize, and imagine. Their defiance is as practical as it is visionary — fighting for rent and food payments, reclaiming bamboo weaving and pottery, and proposing community philanthropy as an alternative economic system. The community and the civil society organisations that support them speak of grief, but they also speak of resolve.

The poem shared during our final meeting captures this spirit of endurance and vision for the future: *"Kwa mikono yetu, tutalinda urithi wa vizazi,"* (*"With our hands, we will protect the heritage of generations,"*). It is both a warning and a promise: that despite violence, betrayal, and exploitation, Ulanga's people continue to imagine and struggle for a future of justice.

THE LAND OF ANCESTORS IS NOT THE PROPERTY OF SUDDEN STRANGERS

*The sky of mountains, of golden rivers,
The land of ancestors, not the property of sudden strangers.
They dig the graphite, with greed and haste,
But we stand, we will not accept destruction.*

*Our forests are crying, birds are disappearing,
The water is getting dirty, children are getting sick.
The people of Ulunga have woken up, with voice and solidarity,
We will shout, until justice is heard.*

*Money is not life, machines are not development,
True development protects life and the environment.
We will sing for the forests, we will cry for the rivers,
We will blow like the wind of rain, Ulunga will not surrender the land.*

*With our hands, we will protect the heritage of generations,
With our hearts, we will defend the land of our ancestors.
The voice of Ulunga is the dance of freedom,
It will not be extinguished by mining machines.*

*Naitwa Chakumira Mkwakwati,
Rural farmer from Ulunga*