



# Decentralising natural resource governance in Ghana: Critical reflections on the artisanal and small-scale mining sector



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## ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the impact of decentralisation on contemporary and future governance arrangements in Ghana's artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector. The sector, while providing valuable employment in rural areas, is beleaguered by environmental and social issues. Proponents of decentralisation argue that re-distributing decision-making authority leads to more responsive, transparent and efficient natural resource management. The analysis presented here, however, demonstrates how weak decentralisation has exacerbated the complex, conflictual and clandestine nature of local resource politics surrounding ASM. If future decentralisation reforms are going to reverse this trend and improve the governance of ASM in Ghana, then facilitating the participation of traditional authorities is imperative. It is argued that doing so requires addressing the reticence regarding the role of chiefs in resource governance; simply ironing out existing technical issues with decentralisation reforms is unlikely to improve the social and environmental performance of ASM in the country. In light of the chronic resource management deficiencies in Ghana, epitomised in the ASM sector, fostering frank political debates on resource governance is becoming urgent.

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## 1. Introduction

The global burgeoning of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM)<sup>1</sup> activities has presented policy-makers with a dilemma. On the one hand, more than 100 million people depend on the sector which directly employs 20–30 million people in approximately 70 countries [1–3]; and, on the other, the sector is associated with a range of environmental and social problems [4–6]. Furthermore, a poor understanding of the sector has undermined attempts to regulate and formalise its activities [7–9].

The relatively nascent literature on the sector has focused predominantly on understanding its principal protagonists [e.g. 10–13], the challenges associated with reforming the sector [e.g. 9, 14, 15] and on environmental issues, particularly the (mis-)use of mercury [e.g. 5, 16–18]. Apart from analyses of the impact of structural adjustment on the sector [19,20], very little attention has been paid to the influence of broader governance trends on ASM, including decentralisation. This paper broadens understanding of ASM governance dynamics by reviewing the influence of decentralisation reforms on the sector in Ghana.

Ghana is an illustrative case to examine because it has a vibrant, but poorly managed, ASM sector and is committed to deepening and accelerating the process of decentralisation [19,21]. The analysis presented is based on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted at the national and regional levels, as well as local sites around Kibi in the Eastern Region,

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<sup>1</sup> The labour-intensive, low-tech extraction and processing of precious minerals.

Bibiani in the Western Region and Obuasi in the Ashanti Region of the country. Between November 2011 and August 2012 a total of 87 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the sector, principally, miners,<sup>2</sup> national and regional level government officials, district level officials and local elected politicians, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and traditional authorities.

The paper begins by reviewing the contemporary context and critiques of decentralisation reforms in general, and then in Ghana specifically. Larson [23] argues that the natural resource management literature tends to focus on the participation of resource-users under decentralised governance regimes; therefore, this paper revolves around the role of District Assemblies in the ASM sector. The discussion shows how the politicisation of the ostensibly non-partisan District Assemblies represents an important characteristic in the largely clandestine nature of local ASM politics.

The role of chiefs under decentralised regimes is also reviewed before the penultimate section reflects on the implications of future reforms on the Ghanaian ASM sector. It is argued that integrating traditional sources of authority into decentralisation reforms is imperative if they are to have any substantive impact on ASM governance. Doing so, however, requires a willingness to address the reticence regarding these issues which appears to be paralysing donors and governments; simply ironing out existing issues with reforms, such as the unelected nature of District Chief Executives, is unlikely to improve the social and environmental performance of ASM in the country. Civil society organisations, such as small-scale miners' associations, are also introduced as potentially fruitful avenues for reconciling the diverse and diffuse sources of authority that govern the sector.

## 2. Rhetoric and reality: decentralising natural resource governance

### 2.1. *The rise of the Good Governance agenda: delivering conflict, complexity and corruption?*

Decentralisation broadly entails the shifting of responsibility for decision-making from central to local institutions. Rondinelli and Cheema [24] distinguish between four types of decentralisation: (1) *deconcentration* of authority from centrally located government agencies to non-autonomous field-based administrations; (2) *delegation* of decision-making and management authority to quasi-autonomous institutions; (3) *devolution*, the transfer of authority to independent and autonomous local government, and; (4) *privatisation*, where non-state organisations assume responsibility for management. Reforms generally contain a mixture of these strategies and they are generally promoted in order to increase transparency, accountability and broaden democratic participation in decision-making. This, it is argued, makes local government service providers more responsive to local requirements, and further improves the allocative efficiency and equity of resource allocation by reducing opportunities and incentives for corruption [25,26].

The rationale for decentralisation is also reflected in the natural resource management sector where there is broad agreement that centralised resource management has failed to deliver sustainable and equitable outcomes [27]. Potentially positive outcomes of decentralised natural resource governance include the empowerment of local people to protect resources, increased revenues for local councils and people, particularly in marginal and disadvantaged groups and increasingly sustainable resource-use [28,29]. The potential for advances in resource governance is reflected in a broad body of literature which supports the drive for decentralisation by demonstrating that natural resource management is most effective when local users participate in rule-making and enforcing, decision-makers are downwardly and horizontally accountable, local institutions are endowed with discretionary powers and there is investment in their capacity [29–32].

Although decentralisation has long been promoted as a central component of development strategies across the world, most recently, it has been co-opted by the Bretton Woods institutes under the guise of the Good Governance agenda. This agenda emerged after the Cold War as a conceptual framework by which to assess and enable reform of international financial assistance which could no longer be justified on the basis of political expediency [33]. Furthermore, the failure of donor-led structural adjustment packages (SAPs) to deliver substantive economic or social development necessitated the adoption of a new approach. The Good Governance agenda effectively represents a set of new conditionalities aimed at making governance participatory, consensus orientated, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable, and subject to the rule of law [34].

In order to preserve the notionally apolitical remit of the World Bank, the Good Governance agenda has been promoted as a technocratic pursuit. However, as Williams [35] points out, the Good Governance discourse is rooted in Western political philosophy and as a result the mandated reforms merely reflect the neoliberal hegemony. The ostensibly country-led Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are saturated with the language of Good Governance, but they tend to promote the same distinctly neoliberal reforms contained in their predecessors, the SAPs [36]. The pursuit of decentralisation, for example, has persisted through the changing donor rhetoric. This is typified in the Ghanaian PRSP [21, p. 99], which states:

Promoting citizen's participation in local governance will necessarily require accelerating the process of devolution of political power to the district and sub-district structures. Strengthening local governance within the concept of

<sup>2</sup> Describing participants in the sector as miners is convenient, but masks the heterogeneity of roles and activities in the sector. These include, for example, ore carriers, washers, excavator drivers, sponsors, land-owners, and buyers [22].

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