



## Viewpoint

## Ebola and alluvial diamond mining in West Africa: Initial reflections and priority areas for research

Roy Maconachie<sup>a,\*</sup>, Gavin Hilson<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Centre for Development Studies, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, The University of Bath, Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, United Kingdom

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 20 April 2015

Received in revised form 24 April 2015

Available online 21 May 2015

## Keywords:

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM)

Ebola

Diamonds

West Africa

## ABSTRACT

There is now a burgeoning body of literature which examines the impacts of Ebola in Guinea Conakry, Liberia and Sierra Leone. This analysis, however, has focused predominantly on health issues, emergency preparedness and the international response in all three countries. At the same time, it has grossly overlooked the social and economic impacts of the epidemic. Central to this discussion is the state of alluvial diamond mining, a centrepiece of the rural economies of all three countries. This paper draws attention to this much-neglected area in the policy dialogue on Ebola in West Africa, and identifies priority areas for research moving forward.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past year, Ebola has claimed thousands of lives in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea Conakry. All three countries, which rank at the bottom of the UN's Human Development Index and are therefore ill-equipped to combat the epidemic on their own, have reached out to the international community for emergency assistance. Numerous parties, ranging from NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross, through various branches of the UN, to bilateral agencies such as the UK Department for International Development and USAID, have worked diligently in recent months to treat the infected and prevent the spread of Ebola in the sub-region.

There is now a sizable body of scholarship which examines in depth the impact of, international response to, and the movement of Ebola in, West Africa (Greenberg et al., 2015; Pruyt et al., 2015). The literature on these subjects seems bottomless, offering insight on everything from new knowledge on potential transmission routes, courtesy of animal testing (e.g. Kilgore et al., 2015); through to new drug treatments and containment (e.g. Grigg et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2015; Washington and Meltzer, 2014; to critical reflections on 'lessons learned' by the international community on ways in which to coordinate the containment of future outbreaks

of disease (e.g. Annette et al., 2015; Gostin, 2015). The sudden onset of the epidemic in West Africa has, indeed, provided innumerable opportunities for medical and health-related investigations. The academic community has responded favourably to the challenge, painting a fairly detailed picture of the effects Ebola has had in the sub-region.

But where this analysis falls considerably short is in its coverage of the socio-economic side of the epidemic. This is somewhat understandable given the lack of knowledge about the functioning and organizational structures of these countries' rural economies. All revolve heavily around an artisanal and small-scale diamond mining industry, which, rather inexplicably, continues to be overlooked in regional development policy. Specifically, although a considerable body of scholarship has emerged in recent years that provides in-depth and interesting perspectives on the dynamics of this sector – which employs hundreds of thousands of men and women directly and many millions more in the downstream industries it spawns<sup>1</sup> – in all three countries (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010; Maconachie, 2009; Hilson and van Bockstael,

<sup>1</sup> Although precise figures are unavailable, estimates of number of diamond diggers in all three countries have been provided: for Guinea, 95,000–110,000; Sierra Leone, 300,000; and Liberia, 75,000 (Maconachie, 2008; Chirico et al., 2012; World Bank, 2012). The general multiplier effect used is six, which means that in each case, the number of people dependent on artisanal diamond mining for their livelihood, across all three countries, exceeds one million. These figures are very conservative estimates.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 01225 384524.  
E-mail address: [rm334@bath.ac.uk](mailto:rm334@bath.ac.uk) (R. Maconachie).

2012, Hilson and Van Bockstael, 2011; Bolay, 2014), policy dialogues continue to overlook, and at times, downplay, the socioeconomic importance of its activities. This crucial policy oversight has proved stifling for research: without the necessary support, backing and enthusiasm of governments, donors and NGOs, investigators have only managed to produce limited and piecemeal analysis of a sector that has long been shrouded in secrecy and which is poorly understood.

The view here, however, is that Ebola has caused considerable disarray in West Africa's alluvial diamond fields, to the point where 'cracks' are beginning to appear in the sector's *hitherto* impenetrable supply chains and the 'shadow networks' that have long underpinned its production. It is also magnifying how little is known about artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) overall, and the shortcomings of approaches taken to formalize and support its activities, in West Africa. The upcoming months, therefore, promise to yield considerable insight about the dynamics of the sector's operations, trade and export routes, the key actors involved at each stage of the chain, and operators' needs, as the industry recalibrates in response to what appears to be major changes in purchasing and production due to Ebola. The purpose of this briefing is to highlight the priority areas for research on the impacts of Ebola on the West African diamond mining trade. If undertaken, this research could shed valuable light on the orientation of diamond supply chains in West Africa, and in the process, inform broader industry and development interventions such as the Kimberley Process and Fair Trade, the effectiveness of which have been limited by a shortage of data.

## 2. Ebola and West African diamond mining

### 2.1. The context

Since the onset of the Ebola crisis in December 2013, mining activity in West Africa's Mano River Union countries has come to a grinding halt. The three impacted countries – Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – share a rich, trans-border mineral belt that runs through the sub-region. Here, geological exploration has revealed a multiplicity of economically exploitable low-value, high-bulk 'mineral clusters' (e.g. iron ore and bauxite), which has attracted considerable foreign investment over the years (World Bank, 2010).

Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are in a state of economic paralysis because of Ebola. Inflation has persisted, food prices and currency exchange rates have soared, and international investors have fled; industries have, as a result, come to a grinding halt. According to World Bank estimates, Ebola could cost the West African economy US\$32.6bn by the end of 2015 (World Bank, 2014).

All three Mano River countries share a long and complex history of inequality, dispossession and exploitation linked with extractive industries. Some commentators (e.g. Wilkinson and Leach, 2014) contest that the resulting uneven development has, in part, fuelled 'structural violence' and destabilized institutions, which has enabled Ebola to spread unchecked. In Sierra Leone, for example, as far back as 1930, the first large-scale iron ore operation at Marampa – run by a company called DELCO – exhibited all of the characteristics of a resource 'enclave', catalyzing few forward and backward economic linkages. By the 1970s, alluvial diamonds had become the key strategic resource that propped up the patronage-based political economy of the APC leader Siaka Stevens. Bureaucratic rent-seeking, a shadow state and accompanying inequality, therefore, were present long before the implementation of Post-Cold War structural adjustment programmes or the advancement of present-day neoliberal capitalism. This lengthy history of

exploitative political-economic relations has far-reaching implications that have contributed to the Ebola crisis. There is little disputing that these patterns and processes have perpetuated economic inequality, positioning some people to generate enormous wealth, but deepening poverty for most, confining them to precarious and insecure livelihoods.

The recent influx of large multinational mining companies such as Rio Tinto, London Mining and Arcelor Mittal, which have been supported by World Bank and government policies aimed at encouraging large-scale foreign direct investment, has fuelled extraordinary economic growth in the region. Sierra Leone's economy, for example, expanded by more than 21% in 2013, largely as a result of a growing large-scale mining presence. But the adverse impacts of the Ebola epidemic and the recent collapse of commodity prices, most notably iron ore, have had a devastating impact on growth prospects for 2015. In Sierra Leone, arguably the hardest hit of the three countries, the macro-economic impacts of the crisis came into sharp focus when its second largest iron ore producer, London Mining, went into administration in October, 2014 (Neate, 2014). The London-listed company was one of the country's largest employers, providing jobs for 1400 local people at its mine in Marampa, and contributing an estimated 10% to national GDP. The company was hit hard by a 40% drop in the global price of iron ore but the disruption caused by the Ebola epidemic proved to be the final nail in the coffin.

### 2.2. The dynamics of alluvial diamond mining in West Africa

Most debates around mining and Ebola have focused on macro-economic impacts, and the implications these have for the international business community. But the crisis also appears to be having devastating consequences at the micro-level, suppressing informal livelihood opportunities for poor people. This is particularly the case for people dependent on artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) – low-tech, labour intensive mineral extraction and processing. The sector features prominently in the rural economies of all three Mano River countries. At the height of the crisis, when vast amounts of territory were in effective quarantine and regional trade routes were blocked, there were enormous logistical challenges facing ASM.

Considerable research has been carried over the past decade which has brought to light significant detail about the complexities of ASM in the region. For example, this body of scholarship has illustrated quite clearly that ASM not only employs hundreds of thousands of individuals directly in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, but is also an activity that is characterized by a high degree of mobility, and often takes place in confined spaces where there are poor safety practices and low levels of hygiene. Recent research carried out in all three countries (e.g. Maconachie, 2012, 2011; Van Bockstael, 2013; Hilson and van Bockstael, 2012; Bolay, 2014; Bah, 2014) shows how complex the organizational structures of these ASM camps are, and has uncovered details of the dynamic labour hierarchies that underpin them.

Here, typically, between 20 and 100 miners work together on small plots, digging gravel, and then transporting and washing it. At the very bottom of a complex diamond supply chain is the digger, who is supported by a 'boss man' under a 'tributor-supporter' system. Chiefs, as guardians of customary land rights, have also long played an important brokerage role in the artisanal diamond sector. They typically serve as middlemen between investors ('supporters') seeking access to mining plots and local land-owners holding mining licences. 'Supporters' hire gangs of youth labourers ('tributors') to work their plots, typically supplying them with food and tools but offering no payment unless diamonds are found. The top of the supply chain is dominated by a series of dealers, brokers and agents, and then finally an exporter.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1047438>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1047438>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)