



Review Article

Four decades of support for artisanal and small-scale mining in sub-Saharan Africa: A critical review



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ABSTRACT

This review reflects critically on why, despite its growing economic importance, artisanal and small-scale (ASM) – low-tech, labour-intensive mineral extraction and processing – occupies such a peripheral position on the economic development agenda of sub-Saharan Africa. A poor understanding of the sector's role in the region's liberalized economies has certainly contributed to this oversight; as has the strong influence, at the policymaking level, of unfounded ideas and generalizations about the sector's activities. After providing a brief overview of ASM in sub-Saharan Africa, the paper explores why the sector has yet to make a mark on the region's local economic development agenda and feature prominently in its poverty alleviation strategies.

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Contents

1. Introduction	104
2. Artisanal and small-scale mining in sub-Saharan Africa: A Snapshot	105
3. In the beginning	106
4. The 1980s	108
5. The early-1990s	110
5.1. Questionable technical assistance and more missed opportunities	110
5.2. Formalization of small-scale gold mining in sub-Saharan Africa	111
5.3. Structural adjustment and the growth of informal gold mining in Sub-Saharan Africa	112
6. The mid-1990s onward: perpetuating a disconnected policy dialogue?	113
7. Concluding remarks	116
References	117

1. Introduction

Why does artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) – the low-tech, labour-intensive mineral extraction and processing found across the developing world – continue to be overlooked in most international, regional and local economic policies and programs? Despite surfacing on the international development agenda over four decades ago, the sector has yet to capture the attention of donor agencies, NGOs and host governments. Nowhere has this been more evident than in sub-Saharan Africa, where ASM provides direct employment to tens of millions of people and

has created innumerable economic opportunities for many millions more in the downstream industries it has spawned.¹

This paper reflects critically on why, despite its growing economic importance, ASM occupies such a peripheral position on the economic development agenda of sub-Saharan Africa. A poor understanding of the sector's role in the region's liberalized

¹ There are countless minerals mined on a small-scale, including diamonds, gemstones, bauxite and columbite-tantalite (Maconachie, 2009; Kamlongera and Hilson, 2011; Bleischwitz et al., 2012). The majority of ASM operators, however, are engaged in the extraction of precious metals and stones, although gold, being the most ubiquitously-occurring geologically, is by far the most popular mineral being mined. An estimated 10 percent of the world's gold originates from the ASM sector (UNECA, 2011). The paper focuses primarily on artisanal and small-scale gold mining.

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economies has certainly contributed to this oversight; as has the strong influence, at the policymaking level, of unfounded ideas and generalizations about the sector's activities. A growing body of evidence (Barry, 1996; UNECA, 2003; Fisher, 2007) which points to ASM having alleviated significant rural hardship, reinvigorated deteriorating smallholder farming activities, catalysed the growth of infrastructure and reduced rural–urban migration across sub-Saharan Africa has failed to energize a donor agenda that continues to promote archaic policies and measures to facilitate local economic development. After providing a brief overview of ASM in sub-Saharan Africa, the paper comes to grips with why the sector has yet to make a mark on the region's local economic development agenda and feature prominently in its poverty alleviation strategies.

2. Artisanal and small-scale mining in sub-Saharan Africa: A Snapshot

Nearly three decades ago, the World Bank published the landmark report, *Small-Scale Mining: A Review of the Issues* (Noetstaller, 1987). The organization relied heavily on this document for guidance throughout the 1990s, when several ambitious multimillion dollar mining sector reform programs and restructuring projects were commissioned across sub-Saharan Africa.

Importantly, *Small-Scale Mining: A Review of the Issues* drew attention, for the first time, to how ASM could potentially be an important source of jobs. It begins by reflecting abstractly on the economic importance of small-scale industries in developing countries, making the case that 'a highly beneficial attribute of small enterprises for developing countries is that they are more labour-intensive than large firms and thus account for an appreciably larger share of recorded employment'. It furthermore argues that 'The same is true for small mining operations which frequently employ large numbers of workers in rural mining districts, where job opportunities are particularly scarce' (p. 13). The document is peppered with business vernacular, making use of such words and phrases as 'entrepreneurship', 'business development' and 'small enterprise', language which captures the essence of the policy mind-set at the time: namely, the view that ASM is populated largely by people in search of business opportunities and looking for quick returns on investment.

The literature that has since emerged, however, provides a much more comprehensive picture of the sector, grounded in empirical findings collected in ASM communities. This body of analysis establishes, *inter alia*, that – at least in sub-Saharan Africa – the sector's activities are much more complex than the diagnosis offered by Noetstaller (1987). Crucially, the evidence presented in the literature over the past two decades suggests that *poverty*, not a desire to 'get rich quickly', is driving most people into ASM and fuelling its rapid expansion in all corners of rural sub-Saharan Africa. Countless studies (e.g. Banchirigah, 2006; Spiegel, 2009; Hilson, 2010; Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010) have made this link, pointing to how the structural adjustment programs and widespread neo-liberal economic reforms implemented across the region in the late-1970s and early-1980s led to the downsizing of industries, crippled smallholder farmers, and initiated a pruning of the public sector. The region's ASM economy and the downstream industries it has spawned have absorbed scores of otherwise-unemployed people who were adversely affected by these changes.

To date, no comprehensive census has been carried out on ASM, so there is no clear idea on how many people are employed directly in the sector. Table 1 lists ASM employment estimates for selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Most are general projections based on surveys conducted by development agencies in villages,

Table 1

Estimates of ASM employment and dependents in selected African countries.

Country	Directly working in ASM	Estimated number of dependents
Angola	150,000	900,000
Burkina Faso	200,000	1,000,000
Central African Republic	400,000	2,400,000
Chad	100,000	600,000
Côte d'Ivoire	100,000	600,000
Democratic Republic of the Congo	200,000	1,200,000
Eritrea	400,000	2,400,000
Ethiopia	500,000	3,000,000
Ghana	1,100,000	4,400,000
Guinea	300,000	1,500,000
Liberia	100,000	600,000
Madagascar	500,000	2,500,000
Malawi	40,000	–
Mali	400,000	2,400,000
Mozambique	100,000	1,200,000
Niger	450,000	2,700,000
Nigeria	500,000	2,500,000
South Africa	20,000	–
Sierra Leone	300,000	1,800,000
Sudan	200,000	1,200,000
Tanzania	1,500,000	9,000,000
Uganda	150,000	900,000
Zimbabwe	500,000	3,000,000

Sources: Data extracted from Dreschler (2001), Mutemeri and Petersen (2002), and UNECA (2011).

and are extremely conservative estimates overall. Most notably, the figure supplied by the ILO (ILO, 1999) for the size of the *global* ASM workforce – 13 million – may, from what little data are available, apply to West Africa alone. But it is the downstream employment which ASM spawns where most of its 'job creation' takes place. There are an estimated six downstream jobs 'created' per individual employed directly in the sector, a list of occupations which includes service people, such as taxi drivers, cooks and clothing merchants; semi-skilled labourers, including machine operators and repairmen; and skilled and educated groups, notably bookkeepers, accountants and technicians.

The bulk of discussion on ASM to date has emphasized its negative attributes (ILO, 1999; Hentschel et al., 2002; Spiegel and Veiga, 2010). In addition to its activities being responsible for defacing vast tracts of landscape and, in the case of gold panning, releasing significant quantities of mercury pollution into the natural environment, operators and employees often work in hazardous and unhygienic conditions. Moreover, many ASM communities – including several across sub-Saharan Africa – have become 'hotspots' for prostitution, disease and narcotics consumption. These 'ills' have captured the attention of journalists, government officials and to some extent, donors, many of whom portray ASM in an extremely negative light, in the process influencing and at times manipulating a poorly-informed general public. It is now fashionable in various media outlets and public forums to discuss at length ASM's problematic side: its perceived child labour problem (Hilson, 2008; Free the Slaves, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013); the 'hit and miss' gold panning activities which leave large quantities of mercury in local streams and soils (Bank of Ghana, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2013); and how producing communities play host to a range of sexually transmitted diseases (ILO, 1999; Hentschel et al., 2002). But lost in these discussions, many of which are one-sided and superficial in their assessment, has been the sector's positive impacts – namely, its contribution to employment and production.

Perhaps more importantly, the problems which have come to be associated with ASM are, in many ways, 'expressions' of its perpetual informality (after Hilson et al., 2013). Most ASM activities are unlicensed, and therefore not monitored and financed through

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