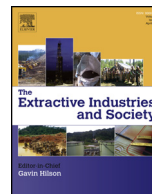




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Viewpoint

The new kid on the old block: Coltan, conflict-prone minerals, and post-war reconstruction in Sierra Leone

Fenda A. Akiwumi^{a,*}, Arthur O. Hollist^b

^a University of South Florida , Tampa, FL, USA

^b University of Tampa , Tampa, FL, USA

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ABSTRACT

Mining is the core revenue source of Sierra Leone's post-war reconstruction and development Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2018). This initiative includes large-scale extraction of minerals such as iron ore, bauxite, and titanium and artisanal mining of gold and diamonds. The government perceives columbite–tantalite (coltan), a high value mineral, as “the new kid on the block.” We examine the nascent coltan industry in Sierra Leone, particularly in the context of the strategic importance of its constituent elements, niobium and tantalum, and the historic illegal mining and smuggling problems in Sierra Leone. Despite policy and legislative reforms in post-war Sierra Leone to bolster state security and regularize the mining industry, overall coltan appears to be falling victim to the historic and traditional political, economic, and socio-cultural structures in Sierra Leone that perpetuate conflict, illegal extraction, underdevelopment, and environmental deterioration. The post-conflict reconstruction agenda responds to policy recommendations from numerous research efforts but more appropriate reforms and commitment are required.

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1. Introduction

To fund some of the post-civil (1990–1999) recovery development initiatives contained in its Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2018) the government of Sierra Leone projects significant revenue from the mining industry. A 2013 *Mining Journal Special Supplement* on Sierra Leone notes that in that year, large-scale operations extracted iron ore, diamonds, bauxite, titanium minerals, and gold. While the spotlight has been on these large-scale ventures, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) remain vital extraction methods and a livelihood for thousands of Sierra Leoneans. The Agenda for Prosperity document records the presence of 17 small scale-mining companies and estimates 200,000 artisanal miners currently operate in Sierra Leone (SL Govt., 2015a). Although ASM is mainly undertaken to exploit diamonds and gold, coltan, a contraction of columbite–tantalite and a high-value radioactive, rare-earth mineral, represents an emerging industry. Coltan's constituent metallic elements, tantalum, niobium, have superconductivity properties and are used in the manufacture of capacitors for digital and electronic devices such as cellular phones, laptops, computer game consoles, medical equipment. Because the metals

are also used in military applications, they are of strategic importance to powerful nations around the world. The *Mining Journal Special Supplement* views coltan as “the ‘new kid on the block’ on the Sierra Leone minerals landscape” (*Mining Journal*, 2013, 7) a view endorsed by the Sierra Leone government.

Although coltan has only recently entered the public discourse, successive Sierra Leone governments have been aware of its presence. Geological surveys carried out by the colonial government between the 1920s and 1950s discovered coltan and other niobium–tantalum-bearing rare earth minerals, including pyrochlore and ilmenorutile, in primary and secondary deposits. In 1954 and 1955, the Minerals Research Syndicate extracted and exported seven tons of columbite under an exclusive prospecting license (SL Govt., 1960). Currently, the Sierra Leone government's online mining register lists several companies licensed to explore for coltan and other rare earth minerals (SL Govt., 2015a,b), yet official government information on the scale of exploration and mining operations, impact, and monetary value of coltan exports remains scant. Indeed, the government's annual mineral production figures do not list coltan (USGS, 2015)

However, the 2013 *Mining Journal Special Supplement* reports that coltan is mined in Bo, Bombali, and Tonkolili districts and is sold locally to Chinese and European buyers at US\$ 5/kg. An online directory of Sierra Leone's coltan and tantalite suppliers lists

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 8139746887.

approximately 30 businesses and individuals offering to export these minerals from the country or to seek out investors. Furthermore, newspapers periodically report on illicit mining and smuggling of coltan from Sierra Leone and the government's responses to these activities (e.g., *African Young Voices (AYV)*, 2013; *Awareness Times*, 2013, 2005). In one such response in July 2013, the Sierra Leone government banned the exploration, mining, trading, and export of coltan and zircon. Two months later, the government, in a press release published in *Awareness Times*, rescinded the ban, stating it had revised the policy on artisanal mining of these minerals. The policy document titled, "Details of policy measures relating to small scale and artisanal mining and marketing of precious, industrial, and sand based minerals," designated twelve national districts and numerous chiefdoms within them as ASM areas for the mining of coltan and associated rare-earth minerals including monazite, a uranium and cerium bearing mineral (*Awareness Times*, 2013). Although these reports are largely published in popular media and a paucity of official information exists, early indications suggest that extraction of coltan—both legal and illegal—is ongoing and that the Sierra Leone government is aware of this activity, thereby implying that it does not have control of this emerging industry.

ASM of gold and diamonds have historically been a traditional livelihood complementing agriculture, and legal or illegal coltan mining will necessarily represent a new income source. Sierra Leone, like many sub-Saharan countries, does not have realistic policies that genuinely support ASM as a livelihood activity that can alleviate poverty in rural communities. These government policies could include, for example, greater access to mining plots for locals, safer working conditions, and fairer pricing and marketing of minerals. The inability to formulate responsive policies to ASM in general has arisen because, as *Hilson and McQuilken (2014)* underscore, policymakers tend to support neoliberal agendas and are also ill-informed about the historical and economic importance of the ASM sector in sub-Saharan Africa. They often have erroneous ideas about the historical layers of political, economic, and sociocultural factors that must be considered for realistic policy formulation and implementation. For example, in Sierra Leone customary land tenure laws conflict with government statutes about who has rights to negotiate lands for mining. Such conflicts challenge the efforts of national governments and their development partners to formulate land development policies. Furthermore, conflict-prone extraction regions, such as the Sierra Leone Gola Rainforest National Park (GRNP) that is contiguous with the Gola National Forest (GNP) in southeastern Liberia, manifest shadow state characteristics—control by warlords, illicit artisanal mining, trans-border mineral and arms trade, child labor, and the funding of wars and terrorist activities from mineral revenues (*United Nations*, 2013)—and blur the boundaries between the formal and informal economies, national and local governance, and legal and illegal extraction activities.

As part of its post-war national recovery strategy to address these challenges, the Sierra Leone government formulated policies and passed laws to support reform of the mining sector, governance institutions (traditional and national), youth marginalization, and state insecurity (*SL Govt.*, 2014). Supported by international bodies and foreign governments, Sierra Leone signed on to global initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme (KPCS). The United States through AFRICOM helped in building and maintaining peace and security by reinforcing Sierra Leone's territorial integrity and strengthening its capacity to resist terrorists and curtail corruption, illegal mining, and smuggling of minerals, arms, and drugs (*AFRICOM*, 2014). A new National Mineral Agency (NMA), created by statute in 2012, will build databases on geology, minerals and mining, monitor the activities of companies, and widely disseminate pertinent information. In

short, Sierra Leone's nascent coltan industry is emerging simultaneously with policy and legal reforms.

At the same time, however, as a strategic high value mineral, coltan raises national and security concerns. Fundamental questions include: what policies and laws are currently in place to govern the extraction of coltan and other rare earth minerals, are they effective in Sierra Leone's ASM environment, and do they safeguard the environmental and health risks associated with coltan mining?

2. Policy and legislation for coltan and other rare earths

Legislation and policy regarding coltan and other rare earths date back to 1946 when the colonial government amended the Minerals Ordinance of 1927 to incorporate in general the prospecting, mining, and exporting of radioactive minerals. The recent post-colonial Mines and Minerals Act of 2009 contains similar provisions. Moreover, in 1947, the colonial government, sensitive to the importance of these radioactive minerals, passed The Radio-Active Minerals Ordinance that specifically listed minerals to be governed and the regulatory methods. The enumeration included such niobate-titanate-tantalate ores as coltan (*SL Govt.*, 1949, 2014). Although the Parliament has not enacted specific legislation for coltan and other rare earths in the post-colonial period, the foregoing government ASM policy guidelines specifically record coltan as a mineral that can be extracted by a license holder. As a strategic mineral, however, coltan necessitates more targeted regulation and enforcement, and it is currently unclear if the more stringent 1947 regulation is still active.

The ASM policy document and the Mines and Mineral Act provide for greater economic opportunities for local artisanal miners because only Sierra Leonean nationals can participate in the extraction and marketing of precious minerals. The government can assign small mining plots to individuals or businesses. In fact, chiefdoms legislatively designated for mining in the 1946 Alluvial Gold Mining Scheme (AGMS) and the 1956 Alluvial Diamond Mining Scheme (ADMS) are the same locations in which the artisanal mining policy document permits coltan mining today. The history of ASM, nevertheless, shows that national license holders are nominal participants in the extraction and marketing of minerals because foreigners provide the capital. The ASM licensing procedure also requires a tremendous amount of paperwork and assumes literacy in English (*SL Govt.*, 2014, 2015b). Both of these factors have the effect of excluding many Sierra Leoneans from participating in ASM and undermine policy efforts to increase access and equity. These policies and laws do not adequately address the gaps and inequities that drive illegal mining or the security risks of widespread access to strategic mineral mining.

3. Managing illegal ASM and smuggling: prospects for coltan

In Sierra Leone illegal ASM and mineral smuggling through established illicit trans-national networks via Liberia and Guinea threaten national and global security. As a high-value, strategic mineral, coltan could quickly become another smuggled commodity like diamonds. In November 2005 the *Awareness Times* claimed that the illegal mining and smuggling of coltan was ongoing when the Sierra Leone government warned against the "huge number of illicit mining activities." The newspaper asserted: "Nothing is known about how it [coltan] is exported abroad or who is supporting the activity. At least one company was carrying out large-scale coltan mining under a gold prospecting license" (*Awareness Times*, 2005).

In 2013, the newspaper *African Young Voices (AYV)* reported that locals, including women and children, were mining coltan in Bombali District as a livelihood, and Chinese nationals and a

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