



Farming, small-scale mining and rural livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa: A critical overview



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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the linkages between subsistence agriculture and artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM)—low-tech mineral extraction and processing—in Sub-Saharan Africa. It focuses specifically on the economic impact of this symbiosis on the region's rural households and the policy treatment of this very important phenomenon. As ASM has long been perceived as a nuisance, and a sector populated mostly by rogue entrepreneurs and therefore not seen to be particularly integral to regional economic development and poverty alleviation plans/strategies, donors and policymakers have, understandably, been reluctant to embrace this idea completely. The review seeks to stimulate a critical 'rethink' of ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa: the alleviation of poverty in rural Sub-Saharan Africa could hinge on recognizing and strengthening the bonds between the sector's activities and subsistence farming. For this to happen, however, a radical change in policy 'mind-set' is needed. This is a necessary first step toward facilitating the overhaul of a policy and regulatory framework that, to date, has stifled the legalization of ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa, and which has consequently confined the sector's activities to informal 'spaces'.

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Contents

1. Introduction	547
2. Reconfiguring the development policy machinery: conceptualizing the challenge	548
2.1. Early conceptualizations	549
2.2. The 1980s, 1990s and 2000s	551
3. Interlocked and intertwined rural livelihoods	553
3.1. Understanding the context	553
3.2. The deteriorating smallholder enterprise and drivers of rural livelihood diversification in Sub-Saharan Africa	554
3.3. 'Agricultural poverty' and the rise of ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa	555
4. Supporting diversified livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa: the case of ASM and farming	558
4.1. From informality to formality	559
4.2. Where is local and regional policy <i>vis-à-vis</i> ASM?	560
5. Recommendations and ways forward: putting diversified ASM-farm livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa 'on the map'	561
Acknowledgements	561
References	561

1. Introduction

Few economic activities are as poorly understood as artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), the low-tech, labour-intensive mineral extraction and processing found scattered throughout the

developing world. Its superficial treatment in policy over the years has led to its exclusion from mainstream international development debates and dialogues. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where today, ASM provides direct employment to tens of millions of men, women and children, and many millions more in downstream industries (Table 1), this has proved to be a crucial oversight.

Prolonged neglect of ASM has confined the vast majority of the region's operators to an informal sector existence. A combination

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Table 1
Estimates of ASM employment in selected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Country	Directly working in ASM	Estimated number of dependents	Main minerals mined on a small and artisanal scale
Angola	150,000	900,000	Diamonds
Burkina Faso	200,000	1,000,000	Gold
Central African Republic	400,000	2,400,000	Gold, diamonds
Chad	100,000	600,000	Gold
Côte d'Ivoire	100,000	600,000	Gold, diamonds
Democratic Republic of the Congo	200,000	1,200,000	Diamonds, gold, coltan
Eritrea	400,000	2,400,000	Gold
Ethiopia	500,000	3,000,000	Gold
Ghana	1,100,000	4,400,000	Gold, diamonds, sand
Guinea	300,000	1,500,000	Gold, diamonds
Liberia	100,000	600,000	Gold, diamonds
Madagascar	500,000	2,500,000	Coloured gemstones, gold
Malawi	40,000	–	Coloured gemstones, gold
Mali	400,000	2,400,000	Gold
Mozambique	100,000	1,200,000	Coloured gemstones, gold
Niger	450,000	2,700,000	Gold
Nigeria	500,000	2,500,000	Gold
South Africa	20,000	–	Gold
Sierra Leone	300,000	1,800,000	Gold, diamonds
South Sudan	200,000	1,200,000	Gold
Tanzania	1,500,000	9,000,000	Coloured gemstones, gold, diamonds
Uganda	150,000	900,000	Gold
Zimbabwe	500,000	3,000,000	Gold, diamonds, coloured gemstones

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

of bureaucratic and costly registration fees, lengthy delays on decisions on applications for permits and an acute shortage of mineralized land prevent people from securing licenses and formalizing their activities (see ILO, 1999; Hentschel et al., 2002). The informal activities that have consequently surfaced have expanded chaotically and unpredictably, have a sizable environmental footprint, and are typically associated with numerous social 'ills', including poor health and safety, high concentrations of infectious disease such as HIV/AIDS, and excessive prostitution and narcotics consumption. But rather than attempting to understand why these activities have come about, the bulk of analysis undertaken to date by the NGO community, donors and host governments has singled out these negative attributes. This short-sightedness has, very importantly, overshadowed a significant phenomenon: how, in the case of rural Sub-Saharan Africa, ASM is now closely interconnected with subsistence agriculture. Detailed analysis has revealed that, in many cases where both activities dovetail, ASM has become the primary income-earning activity. Hundreds of thousands of rural families, therefore, strike a balance between this farming activity and ASM. The proceeds from the latter are increasingly being relied upon for disposable income and at times, to nourish the former. The problem, however, is that despite showing visible signs of diminished viability, farming continues to be the centrepiece of rural development strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The purpose of this review is to draw attention to the growing symbiosis between ASM and smallholder farming in rural Sub-Saharan Africa. A case is made that, in a region of the world long scarred by poverty and which is struggling economically, the two are inseparable. The aim is to stimulate a critical 'rethink' of ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa by supplying evidence in support of its 'rootedness' in many rural sections of the region. Informal ASM activity is often viewed as a nuisance by the private sector, donors and host governments, as opposed to what it is today: namely, 'one of the most important livelihood activities in Africa' (Hayes, 2008; p. 11). Ensuring its existence and providing continued support becomes even more imperative when the role it has played in revitalizing subsistence agriculture is taken into account. Building on, and at times reiterating, points raised in a previous paper (Hilson and McQuilken, 2014) published in the journal, the review

calls on critics to view ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa more so as a source of livelihood, and less so as an isolated industry populated solely by 'rogue' entrepreneurs.

This change in 'mind-set' is a key to facilitating the overhaul of a policy and regulatory framework which, to date, has stifled the formalization of ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa. As is explained in Section 2 of the review, ASM's prolonged peripheral position on the international development agenda, in particular, that of Sub-Saharan Africa, is largely due to its champions failing to build a case for its inclusion in policy in the 1970s and 1980s, when the donor agenda was in transition. With ASM being disconnected from the major policies and programs aimed at facilitating rural development, most interventions made at the time to improve conditions in the sector across the region tended to be standalone, and therefore rapidly disintegrated once start-up funds had depleted. Section 3 provides a more rigorous analysis of the connections between ASM and smallholder agriculture in the region. It argues that, whilst rural African families have maintained diversified income portfolios for generations, the linkages between these two activities have galvanized in recent decades because turbulent economic times, brought about by structural adjustment,¹ have transformed the roles of both activities markedly. Section 4 provides an overview of where the policy agenda is at present vis-à-vis livelihood diversification involving ASM, and the sector more generally. The main message conveyed here is that there is a sizable policy 'deficit' which must be addressed if ASM is to receive the attention it deserves, specifically the enhanced economic role it now plays in rural Sub-Saharan Africa. Section 5 prescribes some recommendations which are keys to ensuring ASM's long-term success as a formalized, supported economic entity in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Reconfiguring the development policy machinery: conceptualizing the challenge

The issue of contention here is the nature and orientation of

¹ Loans with major conditionalities awarded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

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