



# Voices from below: Artisanal- and small-scale mining as a product and catalyst of rural transformation



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## ABSTRACT

Combining secondary evidence from a growing body of literature on artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) with primary oral history evidence from the Southern Philippines, this article zooms in on the relationship between ASM-expansion and wider processes of rural transformation. It is argued that a future research agenda should devote more critical attention to documenting and analyzing (1) the complexity and heterogeneity of the ASM-phenomenon; (2) the role and anatomy of (informal) labour markets in the sector; (3) the ways in which the ASM-sector becomes embedded in rural sociopolitical structures, and how this affects who benefits from ASM-expansion.

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## 1. Introduction

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has witnessed a dramatic expansion worldwide. An estimated 20–30 million people in over 80 countries are now involved in predominantly informal, low-tech, and labour-intensive mining activities (Buxton, 2013). ASM is a highly heterogeneous phenomenon, and includes practices that range from basic panning activities to rather sophisticated hydraulic mining and tunneling operations. As Hilson (2009) has rightly observed, insofar as policymakers and development practitioners recognize the importance of ASM for rural livelihoods, they continue to treat it as a phenomenon that exists in isolation from the rest of the rural economy. Yet a growing body of literature – which, as one reviewer rightly noted, is still in its infancy – indicates that ASM-expansion intersects in complex ways with broader processes of rural transformation.

Section 2 of this article provides a critical overview of this literature. It identifies two recurrent observations about how ASM-expansion intersects with broader processes of rural transformation. First, agricultural poverty and a pervasive crisis in

smallholder agriculture, caused in part by structural adjustment and decades of government neglect, lie at the root of ASM-expansion (Hilson and Garforth, 2012). Secondly, rather than being mutually incompatible, ASM and (smallholder) farming can be mutually compatible (Pijpers, 2014). At the same time I draw attention to a key shortcoming of existing research: by emphasizing the economic and livelihoods dimensions of ASM-expansion, it fails to understand the ASM-phenomenon within the wider sociopolitical context. Section 3 relates this shortcoming to the methodological challenges that hamper our understanding of the ASM-sector's role and position in the rural political economy. Attention is drawn to the potential of thematically oriented oral history interviews, as a methodological instrument for fleshing out the connections between individual life- and career trajectories, and broader processes of societal transformation (Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011). Capitalizing on this potential, Section 4 introduces primary evidence from the Philippines, in the form of a series of vignettes drawn from oral history interviews with a wide range of actors involved in the country's buoyant small-scale gold mining sector. Analyzing this oral evidence in conjunction with existing research findings, Section 5 concludes by advancing a number of propositions about the role of ASM as a product and catalyst of rural transformations.

In the first instance, the oral evidence presented in this article lends further credence to a number of important insights emerging

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from the ASM-literature, including the heterogeneous and poverty-driven character of the sector, and its ability to act as a platform for wealth creation and social mobility. Yet it is also suggested that our understanding of ASM would benefit tremendously from more central attention for the role and anatomy of informal labour markets in the sector; and how it becomes embedded in rural sociopolitical structures.

## 2. ASM and rural transformation: an overview of current debates

### 2.1. The agricultural roots of ASM-expansion

A central thread running through the growing body of literature on ASM is the claim that a pervasive agricultural crisis is the main driver of ASM-expansion. Most evidence in support of this claim comes from sub-Saharan African countries like Ghana (Hilson, 2010), Zimbabwe (Amin, 2008), the DRC (Perks, 2011), Cameroon (Bakia, 2013), Malawi (Kamlongera, 2011), Liberia (Hilson and Van Bockstael, 2012) and Sierra Leone (Cartier and Bürge, 2011). In these countries, a combination of structural adjustment, the expansion of large-scale mining (Hilson and Potter, 2005; Banchirigah, 2007; Hilson, 2013), and in some cases the social dislocation wrought by armed conflict (Perks, 2011; Kelly, 2014), have provoked a profound crisis in (smallholder) agriculture, creating fertile grounds for the expansion of informal sector activities like ASM (Hilson, 2011). Scant evidence from non-African countries like Bolivia (Quiroga, 2002), Laos (Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2014), India (Lahiri-Dutt, 2008) and Mongolia (Murray, 2003) seems to confirm this dominant view that ASM-expansion is rooted in 'agricultural poverty' (Hilson and Garforth, 2012).

Here, debates on ASM dovetail with a broader body of literature on rural livelihood diversification, which details how a combination of push- and pull factors is encouraging a transition away from agricultural livelihoods, into a range of off-farm income-earning activities (Ellis, 1998, 2000; Barrett et al., 2001; Bryceson, 2002). At least in some regions across the rural South (smallholder) agriculture is losing its central importance for rural livelihoods (Rigg, 2006). Trends within the ASM-sector lend further credence to this observation, with countries like Tanzania and Ghana witnessing the emergence of a group of professional 'gold rush miners' (Hilson, 2010) or 'career miners' (Bryceson and Jønsson, 2010) who are involved in ASM on a full-time basis, and have no (more) direct ties to agriculture.

### 2.2. ASM, rural livelihoods, and the rural economy

A second key concern in the ASM-literature is the impact ASM-expansion is having on rural livelihoods, which are said to revolve primarily around smallholder agriculture. Intuitively, one would expect mining and agriculture to be competing over the same resources. For instance, while Schueler et al. (2011) draw attention to how gold mining in Ghana has led to widespread soil erosion and a loss of valuable farmland; Fanthorpe and Maconachie (2010) suggest that the expansion of small-scale diamond mining in Sierra Leone has absorbed valuable labor power that would otherwise be available for agriculture.

Yet most analysts gravitate towards a more positive assessment of the relationship between ASM and (smallholder) agriculture (for an overview see Pijpers, 2014). One influential narrative emphasizes seasonality, with people combining mining and farming activities depending on the demands of the agricultural cycle. A good example is Godoy's (1988) description of the Jukumani Indians in Bolivia. Here, young and 'agriculturally secure' men engage in mining activities when the demand for agricultural labor is low.

Meanwhile as illustrated by Maconachie and Binns' (2007) distinction between 'farming miners' and 'mining farmers', in an increasing number of cases ASM is replacing agriculture as the main source of income in rural communities (Cartier and Bürge, 2011; Bakia, 2013; Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2014). Yet even in these cases, agriculture is still important for food security (Bryceson and Mwaipopo, 2010; Hilson and Garforth, 2012).

In the absence of well-functioning rural credit markets, income from ASM may also be re-invested in farming, with the potential of lifting it beyond subsistence level (Maconachie and Binns, 2007; Kamlongera, 2011; Hilson, 2013). For example, in some regions of Sierra Leone where alluvial diamond deposits are gradually becoming exhausted, and where capital-intensive mining is on the rise, ASM-revenues are supporting a process of re-agrarianization, whereby miners are gradually returning to the farm (Maconachie, 2011). Even with regards to land use, evidence is emerging that ASM and agriculture can and often do co-exist. In countries such as Ghana (Nyame and Blocher, 2010), Liberia, the DRC and the Philippines (Verbrugge et al., 2015), observers have described reciprocal arrangements between miners and surface landowners, whereby the latter provide the former with access to mineral-bearing land in exchange for (informal) royalties and/or other benefits.

Transcending this narrow focus on farming, there is an emerging consensus that ASM—also when compared to large-scale mining (Gamu et al., 2015; Langston et al., 2015)—can make important contributions to rural poverty alleviation, creating vital income-earning opportunities for unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled labor alike (Ghose and Roy, 2006; Fisher et al., 2009; Hilson and Osei, 2014). Increased local income in turn creates a number of multiplier effects, including increased demand for local agricultural produce, for consumption goods, and for services like gold buying, gold processing, catering, public transport, and prostitution (Shen and Gunson, 2006; Bryceson and Mwaipopo, 2010; Bryceson and Yankson, 2010). In short, by stimulating a decentralization of markets (Cartier and Bürge, 2011), ASM-expansion creates opportunities for a heterogeneous group of actors that are able to capitalize on the increased and more diverse demands of the mining community.

### 2.3. The embeddedness of ASM in rural sociopolitical structures

Summarizing the above, the ASM-literature contains important (albeit somewhat fragmented) insights concerning the interaction between ASM-expansion and wider processes of rural transformation. Yet the focus lies primarily on the economic and livelihoods dimensions of this transformation, while important questions remain about how the ASM-sector is embedded in wider sociopolitical structures, and how this shapes who benefits from ASM-activities. Initial clues may be derived from the literature on rural livelihood diversification, which asserts that access to the more lucrative and less risky segments of the off-farm economy depends on access to critical capital endowments like financial capital, skills and experience, social networks, and political power (Barrett et al., 2001; Hagglade et al., 2010).

To some extent, these insights about the segmented character of livelihood diversification are also pervading the ASM-literature. Bryceson and Jønsson (2010), for one, have drawn attention to the diverse background of ASM-workers—in terms of professional background, educational attainment, age, place of origin, etc.—and how it affects their prospects for success. Indeed, whereas people's initial involvement in ASM is usually driven by poverty and subsistence needs, there is a growing recognition that the sector can serve as a platform for wealth creation. While this is true for ordinary ASM-workers (e.g. Cleary, 1990; Bryceson and Jønsson.

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