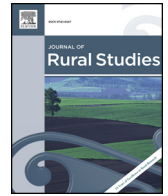




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## 'The war whose bullets you don't see': Diamond digging, resilience and Ebola in Sierra Leone

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reflects critically on the transformational impacts the recent Ebola epidemic has had in diamond-rich areas of rural Sierra Leone. It focuses specifically on the country's 'diggers', a sizable group of labourers who occupy the bottom of the country's artisanal diamond mine production pyramid. Based upon research conducted in the diamond-producing localities of Kenema and Kono, the paper argues how, in sharp contrast to the gloomy picture painted in the literature about their existences and struggles, diggers exhibited considerable resilience during the Ebola crisis. Their diversified livelihood portfolios proved to be effective survival strategies and buffers against the shocks and stresses brought about by lengthy periods of quarantine, and during times when mobility was restricted by the government in a bid to prevent the spreading of the disease. Drawing inspiration from the resilience literature, the paper captures the essence of these survival strategies, which should be viewed as latest reshuffling and expansion of diggers' rural livelihood portfolios. Policymakers and donors have yet to embrace fully these changes in a country where the Ebola recovery period promises to be lengthy and at a time when fresh, locally-informed rural development solutions are in short supply.

### 1. Introduction

A decade ago, Maconachie and Binns (2007) published a paper in the *Journal of Rural Studies* which highlighted the links between artisanal diamond mining and farming in rural Sierra Leone. Using both new and historical data, the paper drew attention to how tens of thousands of the country's rural families engage simultaneously in both activities, transferring finances and labour from one to the other, depending on the circumstances faced. Since its publication, a host of papers (see e.g. Hilson, 2011; Kamlongera, 2013; Pijpers, 2014) have emerged which report similar findings from elsewhere across sub-Saharan Africa. These studies confirm that, despite being overlooked almost entirely in the development studies literature in the 1980s and 1990s, the links between agriculture and artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) – low-tech mineral extraction and processing – are deeply-rooted in all corners of sub-Saharan Africa, and that economically, the latter is the region's most important rural nonfarm activity.

This body of literature has provided a broad conceptual overview of ASM's place in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as demonstrated convincingly that for millions of the region's rural families, the sector is an integral segment of their fluid livelihoods portfolios, which 'adjust' and respond to changing circumstances. Whilst donors and host

governments have accepted – at times, reluctantly – that there are linkages between ASM and farming, there continues to be a general underappreciation about the importance of the former, in particular how it buffers against shocks and stresses during times of hardship. This is a significant oversight in a country such as Sierra Leone, which has experienced its share of unparalleled disasters over the past three decades, most recently, an outbreak of Ebola. The epidemic, which gripped the Mano River region between 2014 and 2016, claimed 3956 lives in Sierra Leone; in total, there were 14,124 reported cases of infection in the country. It has also had a catastrophic economic impact in the country's rural areas, as government officials and donors, looking to prevent spread of the disease, restricted movements by implementing curfews, controlling the circulation of goods country-wide and quarantining local communities. The individuals who fall into the 'mining-farmer' and/or 'farming-miner' categories which Maconachie and Binns (2007) identified a decade ago would once again turn to their complex and diverse livelihoods portfolios to cope with hardship, in this instance, the difficulties brought about by these changes. On this particular occasion, however, the reshuffling of economic activities induced by a crisis has broadened the livelihoods portfolios of many rural inhabitants by bringing to light other opportunities, as well as stimulated semi-permanent shifts in household income-earning strategies.

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**Table 1**

Selected human development indicators for Sierra Leone.

Sources: UNDP, 2016; table adapted from Bateman (2017).

	Sierra Leone	Sub-Saharan Africa	World
HDI (2014)	0.413	0.518	0.711
Life Expectancy at Birth (years) (2014)	50.9	58.5	71.5
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)	107.2	60.8	33.6
Expected years of schooling (2014)	8.6	9.6	12.2
Mean Years of Schooling (2014)	3.1	5.2	7.9
Adult Literacy Rate (% aged 15+) (2013)	44.5	58.4	81.2
GNI per capita PPP\$ (2014)	1780	3363	14301
Employment to Population Ratio (% aged 15+) (2013)	65.2	65.7	59.7
Inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI) (2014)	0.241	0.345	0.548
Gender Development Index (GDI) (2014)	0.814	0.872	0.924
Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (2013)	0.411	N/A	N/A

The purpose of this article is to examine in greater depth how, in Sierra Leone, rural families engaged in both ASM and agriculture coped during the Ebola crisis, and to highlight how their livelihoods portfolios have since changed. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, donors and host governments have failed to keep pace with how the livelihoods portfolios of rural households engaged in ASM and farming have responded to, and cope with, shocks. Implementing policies that speak to the theme of ‘resilience’, which, because of the growing attention being paid in donor and NGO circles to adaptation to climate change, is now a major focus of development efforts in the region, could go a long way toward ‘rethinking’ and galvanizing support for ASM, a sector long overlooked in the region’s rural poverty alleviation strategies. In the case of Sierra Leone, a country which ranks at the bottom of the UN’s Human Development Index, scoring poorly on most social development indicators (Table 1), this is imperative. Here, a more nuanced understanding of how rural families buffer against shocks and stresses by simultaneously engaging in ASM and farming, and use their livelihoods portfolios as a platform to branch out into other income-earning activities, would yield more effective development strategies post-Ebola.

The paper begins with an extended analysis of rural livelihoods diversification in sub-Saharan Africa, with special emphasis on the – often-overlooked – role played by ASM. In particular, the discussion emphasizes how ‘resilience’ has been an important concept for understanding how households adapt to shocks and stress in rural stretches of the region where ASM features prominently in livelihoods portfolios. The section that follows details the struggles and experiences of Sierra Leone’s ‘diggers’, the main focus of this paper. This sizable group of labourers occupy the bottom of the country’s artisanal diamond mine production pyramid, and have long been portrayed in the literature as ‘marginalized’ and exploited by middlemen. But as the penultimate section of the paper illustrates, drawing upon research conducted in the diamond-producing localities of Kenema and Kono in the period immediately after Sierra Leone was declared ‘Ebola free’, in sharp contrast to the gloomy picture painted by the literature about their existences and struggles, diggers exhibited considerable resilience during the crisis. The coping mechanisms that are often characteristic of diversified livelihoods portfolios proved to be an effective survival strategy for these diggers; many also succeeded in using their diversified portfolios as a platform to ‘branch out’ into other economic activities during times of crisis. The paper concludes by revisiting how a ‘resilience’-focused approach helps to illuminate many overlooked nuances in rural sub-Saharan Africa. It is against this background that it calls on the Government of Sierra Leone and donors to ‘rethink’ their approaches to alleviating rural poverty in the country, with a view to implementing policies and programs that are more in tune with the dynamics of what is a very different landscape, post-Ebola.

## 2. Livelihood diversification, ASM and resilience in rural Sub-Saharan Africa

Since the late-1980s, analysis of livelihoods diversification in poor African communities has become increasingly important in international development circles. Initially, such analysis provided a foundation for understanding how the region’s rural subsistence populations responded to a host of economic, social and regulatory changes made under structural adjustment, and in the process, became more ‘resilient’ – the underlying theme of this paper. However, a growing literature now suggests that livelihoods diversification has long been a hallmark of the region’s rural populations, manifesting itself differently depending on the circumstances (Carswell, 2002). This body of evidence provides a timely reminder of how millions of the region’s rural families have drawn upon ‘built-in’ resilience mechanisms within their livelihoods portfolios for generations. Individuals and households often possess different combinations of ‘capital assets’ in their livelihoods portfolios; at any given time and depending on the circumstances, they may convert one category of assets to another (Stocking and Murnaghan, 2001). Perhaps more significantly, the body of literature on diversification, although disparate, offers a glimpse of how diverse and embedded the livelihoods portfolios of the region’s rural inhabitants truly are, in the process, providing a template for developing more robust poverty-alleviation strategies.

By the late 1990s, analysis of livelihoods diversification had been fully mainstreamed into the UK Department for International Development’s (DFID) Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) and variations of it, which had taken centre stage in the poverty alleviation strategies being implemented by donors (Singh and Gilman, 1999; Scoones, 1998; Gilling et al., 2001; Ellis and Briggs, 2001; Allison and Ellis, 2001). Although not particularly comprehensive theoretically, the SLA was instrumental in drawing attention to the struggles endured by neglected subsistence groups. As Carney (1999a) reported, Sustainable Livelihoods thinking, which ‘centred on people and their livelihoods’, had ‘informed discussions with partners at all scales, from the international to the very local’, and in the process ‘provided new insights into the livelihoods of the poor and emphasised the importance of working alongside poor people and supporting them in reducing poverty’ (p. 7). It specifically revolved around the theme of vulnerability, which, as Rakodi (1999) explained at the time of its conception, ‘related to insecurity, sensitivity of well-being in the face of a changing environment, and households’ resilience and ability to respond to risks and negative changes (economic, environmental, social or political, including shocks, trends and seasonal cycles) and to opportunities’ (p. 316). In short, as noted by Carney (1999b), livelihoods approaches ‘have learnt from participatory assessments that vulnerability is a core dimension of poverty’ and have prioritized ‘reducing vulnerability’ or ‘helping people to develop resilience to external shocks and increase the overall sustainability of their livelihoods’ (p. 3). This ‘thinking’ resonates powerfully with the experiences of Sierra Leone’s diamond diggers, specifically how they have responded to the shocks and stresses induced by Ebola.

This body of conceptual work must also be credited with sparking in-depth investigation that has sought to determine why, in sub-Saharan Africa, the inhabitants of rural communities choose to diversify their income portfolios. Initial discussion focused on the issue of seasonality (see e.g. Haggblade et al., 1989; Reardon and Vosti, 1995; Reardon and Taylor, 1996; Reardon, 1997; Ellis, 2000; Barrett et al., 2001; Lay et al., 2008), drawing attention to how, during the non-growing season, rural households pursue employment in the nonfarm economy; the incomes earned here support agriculture; and labour and finances flow continuously between the two activities, and are, therefore, to some extent, inseparable. More recently, ASM has become a focal point of this discussion (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010; Hilson, 2011, 2016; Maconachie and Binns, 2007; Maconachie, 2011), with scholarship highlighting how, for numerous farm-dependent families in sub-

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