



Shootings and burning excavators: Some rapid reflections on the government of Ghana handling of the informal *galamsey* mining menace



Gavin Hilson

Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects critically on recent actions taken by the Government of Ghana to eliminate unlicensed artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) – popularly referred to as ‘*galamsey*’ – in the country. At a time when donors and other governments in sub-Saharan Africa are working diligently to identify ways to formalize ASM and to integrate the sector into broader economic and rural development frameworks, the Government of Ghana has turned to its military and police to combat illegal activity, at times describing its efforts as a ‘fight’ and the phenomenon itself as ‘a menace’. The decision of the government has come as a surprise, given that ASM accounts for more than 30 percent of the country’s gold production, and employs close to one million people directly nationwide and generates millions of more jobs in the upstream and downstream industries it spawns.

1. Introduction

On 10 April 2017, the Africa Centre for Energy Policy (ACEP), an Accra-based thinktank, issued a press release in which it highlights very clearly its support for ‘the emerging national consensus to deal with illegal small scale mining (“*galamsey*”) in Ghana’. The press release, which was signed by ACEP’s Deputy Executive Director, was issued in direct response to the anti-*galamsey*¹ sentiment brewing in – mostly middle class circles of – the country capital of Accra at the time. Mounting public condemnation of *galamsey* activity in the early months of 2017 culminated in the launch of #StopGalamsey, a campaign initiated by the Accra-based radio station, Citi FM, to pressure the government to tackle illegal mining in the country. The #StopGalamsey campaign was quickly backed by other local media outlets, and produced a lengthy petition that included signatures from key ministerial figures – past and present – which Citi FM personnel presented to parliament on 7 April 2017. The campaign has grafted, on to the subconscious of the public, the idea that *galamsey* and more broadly, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), is inherently ‘bad’. It has achieved this through extensive lobbying exercises headlined by messages such as ‘Life is more Precious than Gold’, ‘Help End Galamsey now’, ‘Stop Illegal Mining’, ‘Think Right, Mine Right, Live Right’, ‘Value Life not Gold’, ‘Engage in Sustainable Mining’, ‘Preserve our Water Bodies’, and ‘Preserve our Rich Forests’.²

Citi FM’s #StopGalamsey campaign has managed to achieve the unexpected: engaging and galvanizing the Ghanaian citizenry. What is even more surprising is that many of those who spearheaded and have since supported the campaign have made sweeping accusations without having visited an ASM community before. In fact, most reside many hundreds of miles away from, and have no association whatsoever with, *galamsey* activities. The exhaustive list of influential signatories includes high-ranking officials at the Graphic Communication Group Limited, the Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA), the Ghanaian Times, the Ghana Journalists Association, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and the Christian Council. These and other key constituents of the #StopGalamsey campaign have managed to influence public opinion of the *galamsey* by drawing attention to the environmental impacts of their activities, which is ironic, given that it is their own backyard of Accra, with its Pollution Index of 102.13, that now ranks as the most polluted city in the world, a problem that they themselves have helped to create.³ Before affixing posters which call for bans on *galamsey* activities on environmental grounds to walls in the baggage collection area of the Kotoka International Airport and in up-scale shopping malls, the coalition should perhaps first consider co-ordinating large-scale clean-ups of the ‘Pure Water’ sachets and other plastics which lace the streets of Accra, the very place where they reside.

This commentary reflects critically on the impacts of the

E-mail address: g.m.hilson@surrey.ac.uk.

¹ The term ‘*galamsey*’ is a popular term used locally in Ghana as a label for illegal artisanal and small-scale mining activity, and means ‘gather them and sell’.

² ‘Government is not against small-scale mining – Minister of Lands’, www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2017/04/17/government-is-not-against-small-scale-mining-minister-of-lands/ (Accessed 3 August 2017).

³ ‘Accra ranked as the most polluted city on earth’, www.pulse.com.gh/news/accra-ranked-as-most-polluted-city-in-the-world-id5457261.html (Accessed 4 August 2017).

Table 1
Five demands of CITI FM.

Demands
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The total cessation of all small and medium scale mining for a period of six months • The cessation of the issuance of new mining licenses for a year • The reclassification of mining categories to reflect the use of new/larger equipment • The allowance of water bodies to regenerate their natural ecology • Tree planting and a land reclamation project

#StopGalamsey campaign, and calls on the Government of Ghana, which has *embraced* the initiative, to prioritize a ‘rethink’ in its approach to legalizing ASM.

2. Background

The coalition's lack of familiarity with the challenges facing Ghana's artisanal and small-scale miners and the government bodies tasked with regulating their activities manifests in many ways in the five specific demands (see Table 1) at the heart of the petition it presented to parliament and stakeholders. The newly-elected New Patriotic Party (NPP) Government has acted on many of these, in the process also showing a very limited understanding of the subject. Two of these demands in particular illustrate this:

1. The total cessation of all small and medium scale mining for a period of six months. Mr Peter Amewu, Ghana's Minister of Lands and Natural Resources, responded promptly to this demand. In late-March 2017, he swiftly enacted a six-month ban on *all* ASM activities in the country. The sector's direct contribution to national employment – an estimated one million nationals – and how its activities create many millions of more jobs in the downstream and upstream industries they spawn, including shaft ‘timbering’, machine repair, catering, hotels and taxi transport, seem to have escaped the minister. The minister also seems oblivious to the scale of the country's youth unemployment problem, which, according to the Africa Centre for Economic Transformation, currently stands at 48 percent.⁴ He has rather elected to ‘sanitize’ the sector, going as far as stating that ‘The fight against illicit mining is ongoing and till these six months, if we are unable to clear the system and rid out all the illegal people who are doing the mining, we will not be prepared to engage and bring you back to the mining site.’⁵ Mr Kwaku Ricketts Hagan, a member of parliament for the Cape Coast constituency in the Central Region, has called for a *ten year* ban on all forms of small-scale mining, claiming that a ‘Six-month ban is not going to restore the water bodies and all that’.⁶ The downplaying of the importance of the country's ASM sector is a cause for concern.
2. The suspension of the issuance of new mining licenses for a year. True to his word, Mr Amewu has not approved *any* new mining licenses since assuming his post as Minister of Lands and Natural Resources in early-2017. It is unclear, however, how doing so makes sense, economically: since 2012, ASM has accounted for over 30 percent of Ghana's gold production (Table 2). It is difficult to see how the ban, which is expected to result in at least a 50 percent

⁴ ‘Youth unemployment Ghana's major challenge – ACET’, <http://acetforafrica.org/highlights/youth-unemployment-ghanas-major-challenge-acet/> (Accessed 12 August 2017).

⁵ ‘Small-scale mining ban to exceed six months of... Amewu’ <http://citifmonline.com/2017/05/22/small-scale-mining-ban-to-exceed-six-months-if-amewu/> (Accessed 31 July 2017).

⁶ ‘Ban small-scale mining for 10 years – MP’ <http://citifmonline.com/2017/05/27/ban-small-scale-mining-for-10-years-mp/> (Accessed 31 July 2017).

Table 2
Contribution of small-scale mining to gold production in Ghana, 2012–2016.
Source: Minerals Commission data

Year	Large-scale mining (oz)	Small-scale mining (oz)	Total gold production (oz)	Contribution of small-scale mining to total production (percentage)
2012	2,848,409	1,464,781	4,313,190	33.96
2013	2,808,405	1,441,497	4,249,902	33.92
2014	2,851,885	1,489,722	4,341,607	34.31
2015	2,592,563	1,025,671	3,618,234	28.35
2016	2,620,033	1,134,635	3,754,668	30.22

decrease in small-scale gold production in 2017, constitutes sound economic policy for Ghana.⁷

Mr Amewu's actions and behaviour have been described by many as ‘rogue’ and ‘irrational’. He has repeatedly condemned, on both the radio and television, the key government agencies responsible for regulating mining and land development, including the Minerals Commission, Forestry Commission and Lands Commission. The Minister has particularly singled out the former during his short tenure, initially ‘grilling’ its CEO, in April 2017 following a visit to the Western Region, about a mining license it allegedly issued to Okobeng Mining in Nzema East Municipality⁸; then sacking nine of its inspectors stationed across the country on the grounds that they ‘have not lived up to their expectations since galamsey has festered under their watch’ and furthermore declaring publicly that there was a need to ‘clean up’ the Commission⁹; and most recently, sacking the CEO of unit,¹⁰ who coincidentally, has long been a champion of ASM and heavily involved over the years in programs aimed at formalizing *galamsey* activities. Whilst ‘rogue’ may be too harsh of a description at this point, these actions do have the look of some kind of personal vendetta. Perhaps it is a case of a minister trying to make his presence known during the early months of his tenure. What would be interesting, however, is to have Mr Amewu, who describes himself in his bibliography as a ‘cost engineer’ and is armed with an MBA and an Executive MBA, explain how shutting down an industry which generates work for one fifth of the country's population constitutes rational economic policy.

This leads back to the ACEP press release. A highly-regarded thinktank in Ghana providing advice and consultation on African energy policy, ACEP had never, up until this point, weighed in critically on any development in Ghana's ASM sector. The press release, therefore, marked its first incursion into the complex world of *galamsey*. But as has been the case with most Accra-based organizations that have spontaneously rallied around and/or supported directly Citi FM's #StopGalamsey campaign, ACEP has shown a limited level of understanding of the sector's dynamics and its impacts, strategically electing to focus its attention on selected issues that resonate most powerfully with a public which itself has little knowledge of *galamsey*, apart from the information it acquires from local media outlets and the internet. This was evident when the ACEP Deputy Executive Director was probed further about these issues¹¹:

⁷ ‘Ghana's gold, diamond output to drop as govt curbs small-scale mining’, www.reuters.com/article/ghana-gold-output-idUSL4N1KY096 (Accessed 14 August 2017).

⁸ ‘Amewu “grills” Minerals Commission boss over mining licenses’, <http://citifmonline.com/2017/04/24/amewu-grills-minerals-commission-boss-over-mining-licenses/> (Accessed 30 April 2017).

⁹ ‘Amewu sacks 9 mine inspectors’, www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Amewu-sacks-9-mine-inspectors-531529 (Accessed 3 May 2017).

¹⁰ ‘Gov't orders Minerals C'ssion boss to proceed on leave’, <http://starrfionline.com/2017/08/21/govt-orders-minerals-cssion-boss-to-proceed-on-leave/> (Accessed 21 August 2017).

¹¹ Personal email communication, 11 April 2017.

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