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“This mine has become our farmland”: Critical perspectives on the co-evolution of artisanal mining and conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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ABSTRACT

The debate on conflict minerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been widely documented by the international media, government and non-governmental agencies and academics. In recent years, a variety of international initiatives have been launched to curb the flow of funding from conflict minerals to armed groups. Many of these initiatives, however, have led to the loss of livelihoods for millions of small-scale miners.

Drawing on interviews with key informants and focus group discussions in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) communities in South Kivu Province of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this paper examines the ways in which the national army, as well as an array of armed groups, have exerted control of mining towns. Findings reveal a number of ways that mining has shown itself to be “better adapted” to an unstable context than traditional agricultural models, resulting in the continued development of this sector even during conflict. Constant displacement, the fear of violence, inability to travel safely, and the disintegration of agricultural markets have all contributed to the decline of previous forms of income generation. With its promise of cash-in-hand, low start-up costs, and low demand for specialized knowledge, ASM provides a more viable employment opportunity to youth than farming. Finally, findings from this work suggest that, with components of both “distress-push” as well as “rush-type” motivations, the system could be characterized as third hybrid model: a “distress-rush” process. In this system, exploitation of minerals became increasingly entrenched as a primary source of income, and along the way shaped social, economic, and political structures. A better understanding of the political economies of ASM communities and the challenges miners face on a daily basis would increase the impact and effectiveness of initiatives aimed at curbing conflict and bolstering economic growth in the region.

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Introduction

The debate on conflict minerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been widely documented by the international media, government and non-governmental agencies, and academics (Garrett and Mitchell, 2008, 2009; Seay, 2012; United Nations, 2011). In recent years, a variety of national and international initiatives have been launched with the objective of curbing the flow of funding from conflict minerals to armed groups. However, many of these initiatives have led to a loss of livelihoods for small-scale miners. For instance, in response to international pressure on this issue, President Kabila and the Ministry of Mines put a moratorium on artisanal mineral extraction. The result was economic devastation in many mining communities and increased illicit extraction and smuggling. In this context, little research has

been done on the political economies of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) communities in Eastern DRC. In particular, the opinions, experiences and expertise of local populations have not always been taken into account in the lively debates on this topic.

A notable exception is the recent work done by the International Peace Information Service (IPIS), which examines not only armed group control of mines but also community perceptions related to initiatives to address the “conflict minerals” problem. The results of this work highlight the extent to which armed groups and national military are involved in mineral exploitation. Of the 800 mining sites recorded, the report notes that 410 sites have fallen prey to illegal taxation by non-state armed groups or the national army (IPIS, 2013b). Interviews with those involved in the mining industry also underscored how the 2010 mining ban devastated local livelihoods and drastically decreased quality of life (IPIS, 2013a).

This paper broadens understanding of the impact of control of armed groups in resource-rich impoverished sections of sub-Saharan Africa by detailing the ways in which state and non-

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state groups find ways to exert control beyond simple taxation in mining centres. In addition, it contributes to the literature on the experiences of those in mining towns in South Kivu by providing insight on miner's experiences in these towns beyond those relating solely to conflict minerals initiatives.

The broader mining literature explores how developing countries manage their resources. Many scholars and international agencies have examined how and why ASM has emerged as a viable economic model in sub-Saharan Africa. This line of inquiry, rooted in scholarship around livelihood diversification, looks at whether people turn to mining because of "distress-push" or "rush-type" movement (Hilson, 2009). The former is linked to diversification fueled by hardship and desperation (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010; Mondlane and Shoko, 2003; Maponga and Ngorima, 2003; Tschakert, 2009; Yakovleva, 2007). Two broad examples of distress-push movement are detailed in the literature. First, as Mondlane and Shoko, 2003 and Maponga and Ngorima (2003) explain, small-scale farmers turn to mining seasonally in order to supplement income from other activities. However, mining does not necessarily become the primary source of income for artisanal miners. The second system is more entrenched, where financial desperation causes individuals to turn to mining as a permanent alternative to other forms of work (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010; Tschakert, 2009; Yakovleva, 2007).

The latter are situations where people engage in "fortune-seeking" through mining (World Bank, 2005; USAID, 2005; Havnevik et al., 2007; Grätz, 2004; Grätz, 2009; Maconachie and Binns, 2007; Werthmann, 2009). One of the more illustrative examples of such movement was in Sierra Leone where, as Maconachie and Binns (2007) explain, populations turned to diamond mining as a way to help revitalize agricultural practices and, therefore, post-conflict rural development after the country's devastating civil war. Other scholars have described how working in mining towns brings opportunities to improve social status and to save money to invest in other ventures – such as building a house, getting seed money for a business, or saving for marriage – and that mining can help people to achieve these objectives more quickly than other employment (Grätz, 2009; Werthmann, 2009).

This study found elements of both "distress-push" type motivations as well as "rush-type" elements in mining in the communities that participated in this research in South Kivu. In the sites visited, mining is described as a lifeline and vital source of income that people turn to because of a lack of alternative opportunities. In the devastation wrought by war, older economic systems that used to support the population slowly succumbed to decades of violence, displacement, agricultural decline, and the perpetual threat of looting and predation by armed groups. In addition, mining – with its perception as a quick-cash system – that could be accessed by anyone willing to work has elements of the "rush-type" model. With components of both "distress-push" as well as "rush-type" motivations, the system could be characterized as a third hybrid model: a "distress-rush" mechanism. In this system, exploitation of minerals – which has elements of both desperation and "fortune-seeking" systems – becomes increasingly entrenched as a primary source of income, and along the way have shaped social, economic, and political structures. As insecurity in DRC extended for years and then decades, people became increasingly pushed into, and then reliant upon, mining systems. As mining became more profitable and expanded precipitously, parties associated both with the conflict and with state and traditional power structures found ways to entrench themselves into AMS systems.

This paper presents finding from field research in two territories – Walungu and Kalehe – in the South Kivu Province of Eastern DRC. The findings suggest that, while mining is not the cause of conflict, the "coevolution" of conflict and mining in Eastern DRC has caused ASM to become an important

consideration in understanding conflict-related power structures. These findings complement recent research that also concludes that mining cannot be used to explain the root causes of conflict, but which points to it being a significant contributing factor to the ongoing insecurity (IPIS, 2013a, 2013b).

Methodology

This study draws on results from key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted in gold, cassiterite and coltan mining sites in Kalehe and Walungu in South Kivu Province of Eastern DRC from June 2012 to August 2012. Within the broader territories of Walungu, the following sites were visited: Walungu Centre, Nzibira, Mushinga, and Mulamba. In Kalehe, the following towns were visited: Kalehe Centre and Nyabibwe. A total of 10 focus groups were conducted, with five groups conducted at each site. Between 5 and 12 individuals participated in each group. Groups were comprised of women and men working directly in and around artisanal mine sites. Male and female respondents were separated in order to facilitate frank dialog around sensitive topics such as violence and gendered roles in mining towns. Those in leadership roles were selected to participate in individual interviews rather than focus groups in an attempt to create focus groups that were comprised on those with relatively similar roles and positions of authority.

Discussions were moderated by a local NGO worker trained in focus group moderation and attended by at least two note-takers. Women and men were separated to facilitate more frank discussion within groups. In addition, many professions were characterized by age. Female sex workers and male miners were generally under the age of 35. While groups were not purposively sampled to separate men and women by "younger" and "older" groups, natural age stratification occurred. Differing perceptions among younger and older participants are therefore examined in the Results section. Table 1 outlines the populations that participated in focus groups in each site.

This research was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) of the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and a Congolese Community Advisory Board (CAB) of subject matter experts. All members of the research team underwent training in ethical research practices. All focus groups and key informant interviews were attended by at least one note-taker and one moderator.

Inductive coding of the data was undertaken. Team members generated codes first independently then refined them collaboratively. This process allowed them to identify key unifying themes, explore complexities in the narratives, and generate hypotheses where appropriate. Codes identified as important by two team members defined categories; consistent variations within a category were captured as subcategories.

Table 1
Focus group composition.

Walungu focus groups	Kalehe focus groups
Female transporters of minerals	Female transporters of minerals
Female traders	Female sex workers
Male community leaders	Male miners
Miners and tradesmen working in with minerals	Male tradesmen working in with minerals
Service providers	Service providers

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