



## Land-grabbing, land-use transformation and social differentiation: Deconstructing “small-scale” in Ghana’s recent gold rush

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### ABSTRACT

Gold prices hit historic highs following the 2008 financial crisis, catalyzing an international gold rush. Along Ghana's Offin River, recent mining activities have irreversibly transformed the landscape and lives of local people. Cocoa farms, subsistence crops, forest, and other land-uses have been cleared, with significant implications for livelihoods and food security. Rivers and streams were rerouted into mining sites to wash sediment, impacting hydrology, including water quality. Abandoned pits now stretch for kilometers and pose everyday hazards to community members. While minerals law reserves “small-scale” mining as a right for Ghanaian citizens, both foreigners and Ghanaians control and mine concessions, reflecting complicated land-grabbing processes in the sector. Combining geospatial, ethnographic and quantitative methodological approaches with long-term international collaboration, this article examines the spatial and socio-environmental dimensions of “small-scale” gold mining. We employed remote sensing techniques, underutilized in land-grabbing research, to assess mining-mediated land-use changes along a portion of the Offin River. The total extent of mining increased 2,772.6 percent to 998.23 hectares between 2008 and 2013; “mine water” increased by 13,000 percent to cover 200 hectares. We argue these extensive land-use conversions are enabled through Ghana's contradictory and gendered land tenure systems. While scholars often characterize land deals as occurring through theft and dispossession, we found miners' access land through ad hoc negotiations before mining, compensation following crop destruction and outright dispossession. We detail the diverse actors and practices mediating informal land markets, and the uneven implications for people positioned within social and structural hierarchies, particularly women and “strangers.” Our research troubles “small-scale” categorizations and discursive representations of mining, and urges land-grabbing researchers to examine prolific smaller deals alongside transactions involving thousands of hectares.

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In early-2011 a neighbor rushed to Adwoa's<sup>1</sup> compound to report foreign gold miners were destroying her cocoa farm. Adwoa ran, cutlass in hand, to defend her farm. Cocoa trees can produce fruit for 50 years. While labor intensive and vulnerable to market and environmental conditions, people often perceive cocoa as productive of secure livelihoods. At Adwoa's farm, miners, using an

excavator, felled nearly every tree, wiping out her family's primary income source and future investment in a morning. The miners quickly produced an official small-scale mining license from Accra, indicating the land was approved for gold extraction. The foreign mining operator and his Ghanaian colleague told Adwoa they would visit her soon to discuss “money matters” for the destroyed cocoa trees. Shocked and upset, Adwoa returned home to await informal compensation negotiations if, and when, the miners were ready.

Gold-backed reserves became a “safe haven” for capital investment during the 2008 financial crisis, causing gold prices to hit a

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historic high of US\$1900/ounce in September 2011. Price spikes catalyzed a modern gold rush, particularly in the form of small-scale concessions operationalized with less bureaucratic red tape than company mines. Small-scale mining activities quickly expanded in Peru (Alvarez-Berríos et al., 2016), Indonesia (Bose-O'Reilly et al., 2016), Mongolia (Krätzig et al., 2010), Ghana and other countries.

The socio-ecological impacts of Ghana's recent gold rush cannot be overemphasized. Along the Offin River, cocoa farms, subsistence crops, forest, and other land-uses are cleared prior to extraction, transforming local people's food availability and income. Heavy machinery (e.g. excavators and washing plants) then dig and wash massive amounts of sediment, creating enormous pits. Water is pumped into pits for washing; occasionally, rivers and streams are diverted into sites. Our research and remote sensing analysis reveal mining sites are rarely remediated, despite federal laws requiring operators to do so. While miners, state officials and others discursively frame and license individual concessions as "small-scale," contiguous sites stretch for kilometers (Fig. 1).

While minerals law reserves small-scale mining as a right for Ghanaian citizens only, recent mining operations have been run by both foreigners and Ghanaians. By 2012, an estimated 50,000 Chinese citizens mined openly in Ghana (Hilson, Hilson, & Adu-Darko, 2014). The ubiquitous and technically "illegal" foreign control of small-scale concessions reflects complicated land-grabbing processes in Ghana's gold sector.

While researchers have investigated small-scale mining's impacts on ecologies (e.g. Ofori, Attuquayefio, & Owusu, 2012; Tom-Dery, Dagben, & Cobbina, 2012) and miners' livelihoods and health (e.g. Amankwah & Anim-Sackey, 2003; Hilson, Amankwah, & Ofori-Sarpong, 2013), surprisingly little attention has been directed at implications for local communities (Ferring & Hausermann, 2018; Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2017 are exceptions). Moreover, despite extensive scholarly attention to land-grabbing, few studies link foreign land deals to landscape change and land markets. Research is also needed on land-grabbing's implications for social differentiation (Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2017). Our research fills these gaps by analyzing interconnections between foreign land-grabbing, land tenure systems and informal markets. We then link these processes to food insecurity, livelihoods and social differentiation within communities, specifically "strangers" and women's marginalization in informal land markets and compensation processes.

Indeed, the social and environmental outcomes of gold mining are unevenly experienced among different actors and social groups. Foreign and Ghanaian miners, state officials, traditional authorities and others who facilitate, and profit from, landscape change are typically not those suffering outcomes such as land dispossession and food insecurity. The dynamics unfolding along the Offin River exemplify structural violence, defined as the social arrangements—from women's subordination and racial hierarchies to specific economic policies—that disproportionately harm particular people (e.g. Farmer, 1996, 2006; Wendland, 2010). Manifested along axes of social difference, structural violence is linked to sociocultural and political economic inequality, and experienced unevenly (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016). In Ghana, for instance, long-standing gender inequities in traditional land tenure regimes combine with mining-mediated market and land-use conditions to exacerbate women's marginalization in agriculture.

This article is the result of international collaboration and mixed methods research conducted between June 2010 and February 2017. Using high-resolution satellite imagery, we link land grabs to land-use changes along the Offin River between 2008 and 2013, a period corresponding with historic highs in gold prices. We argue extensive land-use conversions are enabled through Ghana's contradictory and gendered land tenure arrangements.

While scholars often characterize land-grabbing as occurring through theft and dispossession, we found miners' access land through ad hoc negotiations before mining, compensation following crop destruction and outright dispossession. We detail the diverse actors and practices mediating informal land markets, and the uneven implications for people positioned within social and structural hierarchies, particularly women and "strangers."<sup>2</sup> Our research troubles categorizations and discursive representations of mining as "small-scale," and urges land-grabbing scholars to examine smaller deals alongside transactions involving thousands of hectares.

## 1. Land-grabbing

Land-grabbing is often described as a "neo-colonial" annexation of natural resources in the Global South by foreign individuals, companies and governments. Transactions include long-term lease, concession or outright purchase of land. In 2011, Oxfam estimated more than 227 million hectares exchanged hands since 2001.<sup>3</sup> While research has largely focused on land-grabbing for food and biofuel production (e.g. Boamah, 2014; Nyari, 2008; Maconachie & Fortin, 2013; Schiffman, 2013), mineral and hydrocarbon extraction are also important dimensions (Chanda, 2010; Kamlongera, 2013).

The 2007–2008 spike in food prices (and subsequent export restrictions by countries to secure domestic supply) and 2008 market crash (leading to searches for "safe" investments) are highlighted as "drivers" of land-grabbing (Cotula, 2012). However, as transnational investment in farmland continues long past the 2008 market turbulence it is crucial to understand how land continues to be rendered available and investible (Li, 2014, p. 592). Indeed, until recently-elected President Nana Akufo Addo led a crackdown on small-scale mining in May 2017, foreign and Ghanaian miners grabbed farmland largely unencumbered since 2008.<sup>4</sup>

Researchers have focused on large, corporate deals, thereby missing extensive land accumulation resulting from ubiquitous, "smaller" transactions. Moreover, while land-grabbing's spatial and land-use dimensions can be assessed using remote sensing, such techniques—while critiqued for identifying "marginal" land amenable to accumulation—have been surprisingly underutilized (Baka, 2014; Nalepa & Bauer, 2012). We thus combine remote sensing, ethnographic and qualitative approaches to unpack the complex processes mediating land deals and resulting socio-environmental implications. In our study area, for instance, the total extent of mining increased 2,772.6 percent from 34.75 hectares (2008) to 998.23 hectares (2013). Indeed, there is nothing small about gold mining's spatial extent or impact on local land-users.

Foreigners acquire land represented as vacant, marginal, inefficiently cultivated, etc. These categorizations enable land grabs (Baka, 2014; Hall, 2011) and contribute to discursive framings of political economic possibility (e.g. Hausermann, 2018). In Africa, Ethiopian officials displaced more than 500,000 people so foreign investors could "use land more efficiently" (Thomson, 2014), while Ghanaian chiefs approved lease of thousands of "marginal, unused"

<sup>2</sup> Chieftaincy-centered land tenure regimes rely on the distinction between two basic categories of land users: citizens of chieftaincies and strangers.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates may be exaggerated. In Tanzania, while millions of hectares were rumored acquired by foreign entities (Cotula, 2013), empirical fieldwork confirmed an exchange of 200,000 hectares (Abdallah, Engström, Havnevik, & Salomonsson, 2014; Pedersen, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> During the Mahama Administration (2012–2017), occasional "task forces," comprised of military personnel and police, "flushed out" thousands of Chinese miners (Crawford & Botchwey, 2017). Yet, these perfunctory mobilizations of state authority were merely a response to negative public sentiment surrounding Chinese mining (Hilson et al., 2014). Chinese miners quickly returned to work following the sweeps. As 'big men,' including high-ranking politicians, often back Chinese mining operations, arrests are performative (Hausermann & Ferring, 2018).

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