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Navigating the intergenerational divide? Youth, artisanal diamond mining, and social transformation in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

Alleviating mass rural poverty is Sierra Leone's greatest development challenge. It is a deeply political issue in so much as the country has abundant natural resources, yet is characterized by networks of elite actors who capture and control much of the wealth they generate. Access to these resources has long been bridged by informal networks, with strong patron-client relationships defining rural life in resource-rich stretches of the country. Recent scholarly analysis of these relationships has placed much emphasis on inter-generational interactions and power relations, both as a factor that mediates opportunities for young people, and their ability to access resources and lift themselves out of poverty. Here, it has been suggested that mobility and immobility are key factors in shaping young people's livelihood experiences and their ability to negotiate intergenerational tension. The artisanal and small-scale mining sector – informal, labour-intensive, low-tech mineral extraction and processing – provides a fertile vehicle for exploring both the expansion and contraction of patronage networks over time, and how young people navigate the intergenerational relationships that shape their livelihoods. Drawing upon both historical analysis, and mixed method multi-sited fieldwork undertaken over an extended period between 2003–2016, the paper focuses on Kono District, where artisanal mining has long been attracting young, single, unemployed migrants seeking a way out of agrarian poverty. In doing so, the analysis provides a longitudinal picture of the dynamic relationship between youth and artisanal mining, and its place within Sierra Leone's complex political economy. The paper concludes by reflecting on the current state of the artisanal mining sector, where youth livelihood portfolios, patterns of mobility and relationships with patrons continue to be in a state of flux.

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1. Introduction

In Sierra Leone, artisanal and small-scale mining and the attendant seasonal migration of labour to resource-rich areas, have long played an important role in shaping the livelihood portfolios of the rural poor. Artisanal mining activities – informal, labour-intensive, low-tech mineral extraction and processing – have been particularly vital to Sierra Leone's burgeoning youth population in the context of an employment-constrained economy, although patron–client relationships have had a long history of mediating access to resources in rural stretches of the country. The patrimonial networks associated with diamond mining in particular have played an instrumental role in shaping patterns of rural politics and identity—especially those that concern intergenerational relationships between youth and the so-called

'gerontocracy'. Indeed, there is now a well-established literature that focuses on the role that diamond-fuelled patrimonial networks assumed in the creation of a socially-excluded rural underclass during the pre-war years, and how this fomented the preconditions for the country's protracted civil war during the 1990s (Richards, 2005, 1996; Richards et al., 2004; Peters, 2011, 2006; Keen, 2005; Reno, 2003; Wilson, 2013; Zulu and Wilson, 2012). Related to this hypothesis, one common explanation for the underlying causes of the war argues that the conflict developed from an intra-elite struggle to control markets in diamonds and other extractive resources, which was subsequently taken over by armed factions composed primarily of angry, frustrated youth, when the state collapsed (Reno, 1998, 2003).

While the country's brutal civil war serves as a stark reminder of what can happen when young people's social mobility is blocked, many youth today continue to find themselves in challenging situations where they are unable to meet their social or economic obligations, set up an independent household or

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transition into a state of 'adulthood'. As [Boersch-Supan \(2013:27\)](#) remarks with reference to the post-conflict period:

When resource scarcity is compounded by rapid demographic expansion, patrimonial networks tighten and non-insiders are excluded with few alternative routes to advancement Thus those in control become a smaller, ever older group, while those waiting to gain status grow in number as well as with respect to age.

Indeed, while much has been written about the links between diamonds, youth and conflict in Sierra Leone, comparatively less academic attention has focused on how artisanal mining operations – of both diamonds and, increasingly, gold – have shaped, and are having to adapt to, wider change in rural society in the contemporary post-conflict period. Since the formal declaration of peace in 2002, Sierra Leone has successfully completed a demobilization and disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programme and, with extensive donor support, has made significant progress in rehabilitating state security and governance and rebuilding infrastructure. And while there has been much fanfare from the government in its effort to stimulate large-scale extractive industry investment from foreign companies, little focus has been directed towards regulating and formalizing the artisanal mining sector, in spite of the far reaching transformational effects the sector has had on rural economy and society over the years. Although artisanal mining is the second largest employment generator after agriculture, creating income earning opportunities for some 200,000 to 300,000 people, concerns abound that the country's burgeoning unemployed youth population remains a potential source of further conflict. With 40.9 per cent of Sierra Leone's population below the age of 15 years and 36.4 per cent between the ages of 15 and 35 the problem remains urgent ([GoSL, 2015](#)). The catastrophic consequences of the recent Ebola crisis further ruptured the rural economy, resulting in widespread redundancies and unemployment, as foreign mining companies went into administration and the informal economy, including the artisanal mining sector, all but came to a standstill.

Moving on from debates over Sierra Leone's so-called 'crisis of youth' (e.g. see [Peters, 2011](#)), it remains pertinent to the overall issue of poverty entrenchment to explore the significance of artisanal mining and its associated labour mobility, in shaping the livelihood trajectories of rural young people, and mediating power relationships that define access to resources. Elsewhere, research carried out by [Fithen and Richards \(2005\)](#) and [Peters \(2007\)](#) on Makeni's motorbike taxi riders association has noted the importance of mobility in advancing non-agrarian livelihood independence, particularly when young people are able to physically circumvent the influence of elders who control land and resources. Likewise, other research (see [Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010](#); [Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010](#); [Boersch-Supan, 2012](#)) has examined the role that membership in youth organisations can play in fostering autonomy from elders and increasing social mobility for young people. This paper focuses on the way in which social relations between generations are contested and negotiated with specific reference to artisanal mining, exploring the long history of possibilities that the sector has offered to young people as a route out of agrarian poverty.

Of key significance in Sierra Leone, artisanal mining is not only a source of income for young people, but it is a livelihood activity that is defined by mobility, as it also interlocks closely with a host of other downstream and ancillary activities that drive the rural economy ([Maconachie, 2011](#)). This micro-economy is dependent upon seasonal migratory labour streams: individuals 'straddle' different productive activities throughout the year, moving between different geographic locations. Rural youth often combine farming and mining activities, with the former being undertaken

predominantly in the dry season when river levels are low, and the latter being carried out mainly during the rainy season. The income generated from artisanal mining is then frequently reinvested into farming, or to finance the expansion of cash crops, such as coffee, cocoa and kola nuts ([Maconachie and Binns, 2007](#)).

The analysis in this paper thus builds upon and updates earlier work published on the mobility patterns that define farming–mining linkages in Sierra Leone ([Maconachie et al., 2007](#); [Maconachie and Binns, 2007](#)), and contributes to evolving debates concerning the relationship between mining, agrarian change and social transformation in sub-Saharan Africa that have been rehearsed extensively in recent years ([Maconachie and Hilson, 2016](#); [Kotsadam and Tolonen, 2016](#); [Bryceson and Jonsson, 2010](#); [Hilson and Ackah-Baidoo, 2011](#); [Hilson, 2009](#)). As noted by [Porter et al. \(2010\)](#), for young people, physical mobility is often closely bound up with social mobility, which has important associated impacts in terms of intergenerational tensions and negotiation.

In providing a longitudinal focus on labour migration, youth livelihoods and the changing nature of patronage relationships in the artisanal mining sector, the paper proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, section two briefly sketches out a broad historical overview of the role that artisanal mining has assumed in rural society in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province, spanning the period between the colonial era and the country's civil war of the 1990s, and highlighting the importance of youth migration streams and the support networks that sustain mining labour. In doing so, the discussion explores the dynamics of patron-client relationships, while offering insight into some of the early political responses to youth mobility associated with mining migration. This sets the stage for section three, which draws upon primary data gathered in Kono District over an extended period between 2003 and 2016, and explores the role of artisanal mining in shaping intergenerational relations in the context of a changing, post-war rural landscape. The final section of the paper examines the current state of Sierra Leone's artisanal mining sector, providing some reflection on the impacts of the recent Ebola outbreak on labour mobility and patronage networks, where, in the aftermath of the crisis, there continues to be far-reaching socio-economic consequences. The paper concludes by drawing out a number of lessons that concern youth mobility and artisanal mining, as the government of Sierra Leone discusses possibilities for formalizing the sector and updating core minerals policy.

2. Artisanal mining, labour mobility and patronage in historical context

Alluvial diamonds were first discovered in the Gbobora stream in Kono District in the Eastern Province in 1930, and further geological exploration subsequently revealed the main deposit in the central plains of Kono District. When mining operations first began in 1932, the colonial government's strategy to capture the revenue generating potential of diamond mining was to grant an exclusive license to explore, mine and market diamonds to the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST), a wholly owned subsidiary of Consolidated African Selection Trust ([Saylor, 1967](#)). In 1953, a second major deposit was discovered in Lower Bambara Chiefdom in Kenema District. Here, diamonds found in the basin of the Male River were traced via the Moa River to the Tongo River ([Binns, 1982a](#)).

Since the diamond deposits were dispersed over an area exceeding 20,000 square kilometres, and therefore impossible to monitor, they soon attracted widespread in-migration from youth all over West Africa, who arrived with rudimentary hand tools to undertake artisanal extraction. The informal nature of mining, with its low barriers to entry, immediately served as a magnet for

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