



Mining for change? Youth livelihoods and extractive industry investment in Sierra Leone



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ABSTRACT

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Over the past two decades, neoliberal reforms, soaring commodity prices and heightened global resource demands have led to significant growth in extractive industry investment across sub-Saharan Africa. A surge of investment has triggered a variety of responses in mineral-rich communities – from outright rejection, to protest over labour conditions, to acceptance in anticipation of gainful employment. Drawing on recent research carried out in Kono District in Sierra Leone, this article critically explores these contrasting responses to mining activities, by focussing on how youth perceive and respond to extractive industry expansion. In doing so, the paper broadens understanding of why youth perceptions of mining investment differ, and illuminates the various factors underlying a diverse range of responses to the expansion of extractive industries. The focus on youth and its heterogeneity as a social category has important policy implications and the paper makes a contribution to understanding the dynamics and diversity of youth livelihood strategies in resource rich developing countries. In making a distinction between autonomous spaces of community-led development 'from below' and corporate controlled spaces of development 'from above', the article reflects on how youth perceptions of extractive industry expansion may also be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies.

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Introduction

Across sub-Saharan Africa, pressures on natural resources are rapidly increasing in response to growing global demands for fuel and non-fuel minerals. Over the last two decades, the globalization of the extractive industries has led to dramatic technological, organizational and regulatory changes across the African continent, as many governments have adopted new mining codes, or revised existing ones, to stimulate a flood of foreign direct investment in mineral extraction (Bridge, 2004). While Africa's natural resources have become increasingly important in global markets, with some sub-Saharan countries experiencing phenomenal growth (Weng et al., 2013), paradoxically, the continent remains the world's poorest region. The communities surrounding the locations of extraction are often the most marginalized and economically depressed, as serious social and environmental impacts displace indigenous populations from their land and transform local livelihoods.

In such contexts, as Bebbington, Hinojosa, Humphreys, Bebbington, Luisa Burneo, and Warnars (2008) suggest, investments in mineral extraction have become a particularly contentious and ambiguous face of global capitalist expansion, often leading to a pronounced increase in conflict and social mobilization around the detrimental effects of mining and hydro-carbon projects. In many extraction-impacted communities, evidence also suggests that youth – understood here as a social category defined by a combination of age, social status and relative livelihood dependence – are in particularly disadvantaged positions. Even in locations of abundant natural resource wealth, young people often lack access to land, credit, employment opportunities and other assets. At the same time, however, they may be in better positions to mobilize, being more literate, more able to take advantage of new communication technologies, and more attuned to global narratives on the environment and rights.

Focussing on the case of Sierra Leone, this paper critically explores contrasting youth perceptions of, and responses to, recent extractive industry expansion. Questions that concern the future of Sierra Leone's natural resource wealth, and of what is often referred to as a 'crisis of youth', are both central to post-conflict development trajectories, government peace-building initiatives and

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security sector reform. Indeed, in recent years, there has been renewed interest in debates about the underlying causes of Sierra Leone's decade-long diamond-fuelled civil war of the 1990s, with considerable difference of opinion about whether the conflict was driven more by politics ('grievance') or exploitative economic interests ('greed') (e.g. see Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). While it is true that some of the bitterest battles of the war were fought in the diamond mining areas of Kono District, the root cause of the conflict is now increasingly being linked to underlying questions that concern the marginalization of youth (Mokuwa, Voors, Bulte, & Richards, 2011; Peters & Richards, 2011). A growing literature on the agrarian dimensions of Sierra Leone's war, and more specifically the intergenerational tensions that drove the conflict, suggests that large numbers of socially excluded young people were prompted to embrace the war in a desperate search for empowerment. These same concerns for youth marginalization remain high on the post-war agenda for donors and policy makers, largely driven by particular concerns that continuing youth alienation may be a potential source of further conflict.

While the 'crisis of youth' may have become the master narrative of post-war reconstruction in Sierra Leone, youth concerns have also increasingly become a focal point for a host of new international mining companies who are keen to invest in a politically stable country. With 42 per cent of Sierra Leone's population below the age of 15 years, and 34 per cent between the ages of 15 and 35, young people represent the majority of the population (GoSL, 2004). But at the same time, this very age cohort is most likely to be equipped with few employable skills and be inactive in the labour market (Peeters, Cunningham, Acharya, & Van Adams, 2009). Government estimates suggest that 70 per cent of all youth are presently unemployed or underemployed (Peeters et al., 2009) and youth employment generation has understandably been designated as a central development pillar in the country's third PRSP, 'The Agenda for Prosperity'. Meeting the challenges of youth is a key element of the government's vision for achieving middle-income status within the next twenty-five years, a goal which also relies heavily on natural resources being the initial driver for rapid growth (GoSL, 2012).

In this context, the objectives of this paper are twofold: first, it seeks to explore how changing global-economic patterns and processes associated with extractive industry investment are shaping livelihood perceptions and opportunities for young people in resource-rich communities; and second, it aims to understand how youth responses to extractive industry expansion may be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies. Drawing upon recent research carried out in diamondiferous Kono District, where there has been a proliferation of foreign interest in mineral extraction, the paper seeks to critically explore heterogeneity within the social category of youth, in the context of its relationship to social activism, mining and livelihoods. For young people in Kono District, the underlying agendas and motivations for engaging with mining companies vary considerably between different subgroups of youth, as do the responses of companies to these different voices.

In trying to better understand how the agency of youth shapes and responds to extractive industry investment, different 'spaces of participation' are explored and the distinction is made between 'invited' corporate controlled spaces of development 'from above', and more autonomous non-institutionalized spaces created 'from below' through social activism. Discussions with young people in Kono District reveal that much youth participation in mobilizations driven by mining expansion has crystalized on the back of severe exploitation and marginalization by powerful corporate actors. But at the same time, evidence also suggests that some mining-based

advocacy groups have been equally motivated by the opportunity of attracting external development funding from international actors. As poverty and hardship have become entrenched during the post-war period, some youth may be drawing on mining-focused social activism as a new livelihood strategy and an avenue to advance their causes.

Following this introduction, the first section of the paper outlines a broad conceptual approach for understanding how different actors respond to the impacts of mining, and how community development initiatives are driven. Indeed, many mining companies now adopt the language of 'participation' and 'sustainable development' as a central platform of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies. Drawing upon the work of Andrea Cornwall, it is suggested that a spatial lens is a particularly useful metaphor for exploring how power and participation are situated within the community development initiatives found in many mining areas. More specifically, a distinction is made between corporate controlled spaces of development 'from above' and youth-led spaces of development 'from below'. This discussion sets the stage for section two, which focuses in further detail on youth perceptions of mining investment, and the factors underlying their diversity of responses to the expansion of extractive industries. In section three, the article reflects on how different youth responses to extractive industry expansion may be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand their social responsibility strategies. Ultimately, as is explored in the conclusion, a better understanding of how diverse interpretations of 'sustainability' become shaped by conflicting interests and underlying agendas remains critical for ensuring that young people in Sierra Leone are included in development processes that have for so long been dominated by powerful actors.

Conceptualizing 'spaces for change'

Over the past two decades, 'participation' has become enshrined as a central tenet of development discourse and is now widely accepted as 'standard practice' in development policy and practice around the world. Corporate approaches to community development are no exception to this norm, with some scholars arguing that "[t]he notion of 'participation' is integral to the discourses of CSR and development, both as a process and as an end in itself" (Kemp, 2010: 203). While there is now a burgeoning body of scholarly work which has explored participation in a wide range of development contexts, there are a number of recent works which are especially germane to understanding how CSR initiatives are being designed and implemented in mining communities in Sierra Leone. Most notably, the sub-category of work which reflects on issues of power and difference in participation and development is particularly relevant to understanding how youth are being included, or excluded, from community development processes.

Recent critiques of participatory approaches to development argue that there is often a danger of participation being based on "over-optimistic notions of agency combined with romantic ideas about groups and institutions" (Cleaver, 2004: 271). Even when local people are included in decision-making processes, there is still often a failure to transform existing social, political and economic structures in ways that give voice to those who have been marginalized (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Consequently, in exploring the processes that are underpinning social transformations in regions of extractive industry expansion, it remains important to appreciate that spaces of engagement are always mediated by relationships of power between actors, and by the modes of influence that different actors exercise. As succinctly summarized by Hamann (2003: 251):

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