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# Perspectives on migration patterns in Ghana's mining industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines migration patterns in Ghana's mining sector, and briefly highlights linkages between stages of mine development and migration flows. The growth, stagnation and closure phases of mine development may each be characterised by distinct migration patterns. The paper concludes with policy-relevant implications of the dynamics of migration patterns in the mining sector, arguing in particular that Ghana is, in addition to traditionally being a country of destination, becoming a transit area for prospective migrant miners.



## Introduction

Historically, labour migration from within the West African sub-region has played a major role in Ghana's mining industry. Available records suggest that before independence, the industry experienced labour migration from Nigeria, Burkina Faso and as far 'a field' as Mali, Niger and Chad. Many migrants eventually engaged in various sections of the industry, and made significant contributions to the development of the emergent post-independent Ghana as well as communities that surfaced with mining. Internally, many indigenous people also drifted to mining centres lured, in part, by employment, economic opportunities and services that the industry offered. In short, buoyed by the then favourable political environment, the emergence of the burgeoning mining industry ultimately culminated in various dynamic changes in the socio-economic, political and cultural fabric of many indigenous communities. Trade, education, inter-marriages, business and skills development thrived as a result of the emerging migrant workforce. Migrants—ranging from skilled to semi-skilled to non-skilled—gradually settled in various mining centres or sectors such as railways, health, agriculture, civil and public service, all of which mainly serviced the industry. This was essentially a period, by the standards of the era, when medium- to large-scale mining (LSM) entities that operated mainly underground mines processed high grades of gold, often over 100 g per tonne of material (100 g/t). The LSM sector continued to host migrant labour even after independence until the early 1980s, after which period stagnation in production, due to failure to modernize, diversify and secure capital, and unfavourable commodity prices, fuelled a significant out-migration of people from the mining areas though not necessarily from the country. The ensuing collapse of infrastructure and economic wealth resulted in the deterioration of many mining communities in what are characteristically termed 'ghost settlements or towns'. Currently, the labour market within the industry appears to be saturated with certain local skills but equally deficient in others. For example, many locally trained geologists are steadily being engaged by exploration companies to work in the sub-region and beyond (e.g., Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal and South Africa) whilst, at the same time, expatriates have 'moved into' specialized areas such as contract mining, provision of specialized goods and services, ore reserve estimation and laboratory quality assurance.

The artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector, volumetrically of lesser significance during the colonial era, experienced phenomenal growth from the late 1980s that roughly coincided with declining fortunes in the LSM sector, high national unemployment levels, increased population growth and, partly, neo-liberal government policies that saw diminished state participation in many economic enterprises. The mass retrenchment of mainly semi- and non-skilled workforces that followed in various sectors of the economy in general and LSM entities in

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particular appears to have fuelled increased ASM activity in various parts of the country (Banchirigah, 2006; Hilson and Potter, 2005). Many migrants, both national and trans-national, streamed into the ASM sector, which became highly visible in terms of scale of activity, number of people involved, sites of operation and socio-economic importance to the miners, local communities and the country. At the same time, the environmental repercussions of ASM activities became more apparent not only in the public domain but also in many discourses on mining and its relationship to development. Despite the numerous scholarly and policy studies undertaken over the years on the mining sector in the sub-region in general and Ghana in particular (e.g., Akabzaa, 2000; Aryee, 2001; Aubynn, 2006; Gibb, 2006; Aryee et al., 2003; MacDonald, 2006; Yelpaala and Ali, 2005; Tschakert and Singha, 2007), certain aspects such as migration and community dynamics have not received much attention and, hence, continue to be poorly understood.

This paper helps to bridge this gap by examining the role mining has played in influencing the national and cross-border movement of people, and the possible repercussions (of such movement) on the dynamics of migration in the mining sector in Ghana and the sub-region overall.

## History and patterns of migration in the mining sector

The history of migration in the mining industry in Ghana dates back to over a century when many ethnic communities that existed mainly as tribes and/or kingdoms used gold not only as a medium of exchange to trade various goods and services but also an embodiment of the power, wealth, and influence of various tribal groups or states (Hilson, 2002). In fact, many of the internecine wars that occurred in the West African sub-region before the arrival of Europeans and likely up to the mid-nineteenth century were, in part, deeply rooted in the quest by some such states to not just extend their influence and territorial boundaries but, even more importantly, secure mineral-rich lands. Militarily weaker states, almost always at the mercy of stronger, powerful and more organised states, were either forced to flee from agricultural or mineral-rich areas, or forcibly annexed and 'incorporated' into victorious kingdoms. Indigenous tribes in forested areas also traded salt and other commodities with coastal states, which also occasioned minor migration of people from the hinterlands to coastal areas.

### *The political economy of mining in the Gold Coast colony*

With the onset of colonization by the British Empire and attendant resource-driven export-oriented economy, vast areas of the then Gold Coast were acquired by various prospectors for exploration. The colonial government, having prioritized mining as a major economic activity, vigorously pursued a policy that sought to enhance the role of mining in the various satellite colonies and the need for mineral resources to feed the industrial establishment in the British Empire. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the colonial government tacitly encouraged investment in the mining sector, first by making available to prospective overseas investors information on the mineral potential of the colony and second by recruiting qualified and/or skilled personnel to explore and manage exploration programmes to identify and document the mineral wealth of the colony. By 1913 (before the onset of World War I), the then colonial government had established a Geological Survey Department, manned by highly educated and skilled personnel, many of whom were recruited from overseas. Names of various Directors of the Gold Coast Geological Survey (now Geological Survey of Ghana) in the persons of Sir Albert Kitson (1913–1930), Dr. N.R. Junner (1930–1946), T. Hirst (1946–1951) and D.A. Bates (1951–1962) are credited even to this day with numerous mineral discoveries as well as scholarly publications that continue to feature prominently in geological literatures worldwide.

The Gold Coast Geological Survey was mandated to pursue vigorous recruitment of highly skilled expatriates in various earth science disciplines (e.g., petrology, mineralogy, geochemistry, geophysics, palaeontology, structural geology) from countries around the world, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Bulgaria, the Soviet Union, Romania and Poland. Various gold prospects, manganese, bauxite and diamonds (alluvial) were discovered in rock formations named Birimian (after a type of rocks in the Birim River valley, eastern Ghana) and Tarkwaian (typical rocks also found in Tarkwa, western Ghana). By 1930, geological maps were replete with the mineral-bearing areas of the Gold Coast and also credited with the actual occurrence of mineral prospects or deposits all over the landscape, especially in the south-western and northern parts of the colony. This information on the mineral-rich potential of the Gold Coast was made available by the colonial administration to prospective investors in Britain—many of whom explored, acquired and mined gold on concessions in various parts of the country. During the period, some mines produced prolific amounts of processed ore with tonnage/grades exceeding 100 g/t.

### *Migrant destinations in the mining economy*

The relative success of exploration and development in the mining industry under the British colonial administration fuelled massive infrastructural development in road/rail transport, banking, health services and education in and around resource-rich areas in what is now the Western, Ashanti and, to some extent, Eastern and Central Regions. The demand for labour in the mining industry far outstripped supply in what used to be a predominantly agrarian economy in these areas. It is known that in many cases, indigenous people or the local labour force were either unwilling or unable to supply the labour requirements (Adepoju, 2005). The shortfall in labour supply, improvements in road networks and communication infrastructure, and less stringent inter-regional border controls provided the necessary impetus and demand that encouraged a wave of immigrants from neighbouring British, French and German colonies into the Gold Coast in search of work. Immigrants from other West African countries congregated in the mining areas and constituted a workforce that often far outnumbered native or indigenous people. It is on record that just before the onset of the Second World War, well over 100 prospects or deposits, located in fairly narrow gold-bearing corridors described as belts, were owned by foreigners in the Gold Coast and northern territories (Junner, 1935).

Out of six such belts then known to host most of the mineral deposits in the country, the Axim–Konongo (Ashanti) belt, which stretches from Axim in the south to Konongo in the north, constituted the most important zone and therefore received the greatest proportion of immigrants. The discovery of rich and fairly vast deposits of gold, manganese and diamonds within this belt at what is now Konongo, Obuasi, Tarkwa, Nsuta, Bogoso and Prestea—combined with the presence of comparatively better infrastructure linking these areas with other parts of the country (rail and road transport, telecommunications, etc.)—provided fertile spatial environments for immigration. Migration flows into these areas were in response to the volume and grade of reserves (especially gold), concentration of mines, infrastructure, numerous industries that serviced the mines and demand for mine-related skills. Further migration also took place with the discovery