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# Gold Digging Careers in Rural East Africa: Small-Scale Miners' Livelihood Choices

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**Summary.** — Rural livelihood studies over the past two decades have stressed directional movement away from smallholder agriculture and the diffuse, *ad hoc*, uncertain, and low-earning character of most rural non-agricultural income diversification. Based on a recent survey of small-scale mining in Tanzania, this article documents the higher risks, greater potential earnings, more elaborate division of labor, and career trajectory of miners. Tracing cohort entry groups indicates that those willing to withstand the hardships of moving from one gold strike to another and time commitment to a career considered dangerous and alienated from agrarian traditions of the Tanzanian countryside may be materially rewarded for their efforts.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about income diversification in rural Africa over the past two decades. The decline of smallholder farmers' commodity prices and productive and marketing infrastructure ushered in a protracted period of rural livelihood experimentation. The literature has debated what effect the trend is having on levels of rural poverty and inequality (Ellis, 2000; Ellis & Freeman, 2005; Homewood, 2008; Meagher, 2001). Profound occupational restructuring through processes of “deagrarianization” and “depeasantization” is insidiously altering the social, cultural, and political fabric of the African countryside (Bryceson, 1996, 2000; Bryceson & Jamal, 1997).

As increasing amounts of rural household income began to be generated through non-agricultural activities, it became unclear what work was replacing smallholder commercial agriculture. Rural trade and service activities proliferated, but a scrutiny of individual and household income-earning revealed diversified *ad hoc* work experimentation of a highly fluid nature rather than regular, specialized work patterns. Hence the livelihood literature of the last decade and a half has focused primarily on the assets and capital investments that rural agents could deploy in their experimental livelihood activities rather than any targeted skill acquisition for defined career paths. Livelihoods were in flux and donor agencies saw their role as facilitating producers' credit or infrastructure for much needed rural household income-earning in the short and medium term.

In the process of deagrarianization, a number of African national economies have become increasingly reliant on mineral exports, and some of them have afforded small-scale miners considerable space in prospecting and excavation. Using case study material from Tanzania, the following article documents how the skill and teamwork requirements of small-scale mining<sup>1</sup> have, over the course of the last three decades, pushed

beyond livelihood experimentation to coalesce as discernable career paths in mining. Hundreds of thousands of people across the age spectrum are now earning a livelihood in small-scale mining. The following discusses why and how this sector of the economy is attracting workers toward it, thereby generating an alternative to peasant farming, despite public perceptions of exploitative and insecure work conditions and social vice in the mining settlements.

The first section contrasts experimental livelihood diversification with features of mining that militate for the emergence of small-scale mining careers. The rise of Tanzanian small-scale gold mining as a magnetic force in rural labor markets is reviewed before turning to the methodology and background of our comparative study of two Tanzanian gold mining settlements. The surveyed miners are grouped into career entry age and mining entry year cohorts as well as hierarchical mining function groups for tracing their careers and differentiated outcomes before turning to the distinction between career and diversification strategies in our two case study mining sites. The conclusion appraises the career patterns of Tanzanian small-scale miners at present and in the future.

## 2. LIVELIHOOD EXPERIMENTATION *VERSUS* CAREER TRAJECTORIES IN RURAL SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The African rural livelihoods literature (Bryceson, 1999, 2002a; Ellis, 2000; Ellis & Freeman, 2005; Francis, 2000;

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Grawert, 1998) has extensively documented the diversified array of service and productive activities that country dwellers have sought as alternatives to commercial farming. While some livelihood typologies have emerged, researchers have not generally identified regularized activity sequences and occupational patterns in their survey data and work histories (Bryceson, 2002b). Instead, the recorded work activities and their temporal ordering in individual work lives have been characterized by open-endedness, erratic change over time, and/or the simultaneous pursuit of multiple activities, related to the extremely competitive conditions that diversifying experimenters have faced.

The lack of agricultural investment in African countries and the severe disincentive effects experienced by African smallholder farmers in global commodity markets in the wake of the 1970s oil crises pushed rural smallholder farming households to reduce production of the agricultural export crops that African economies had been identified with for decades. Instead, they sought to construct alternative income-earning portfolios against considerable odds. Rural purchasing power was contracting in response to the shrinkage of agricultural commodity markets. Large numbers of rural dwellers, notably youth and women, were flocking to easy-entry service and product markets where start-up capital was not required. Given the magnitude of labor displacement from commercial agricultural production, the supply of goods and services in these markets became glutted, driving prices down. Lack of capital and skills kept most income diversifiers restricted to these markets.

Only a few, usually those with the advantage of strong urban connections or ample land assets, had the capital to enter the more lucrative fields of grain milling, motorized transport services, and guesthouses. In the 21st century, many parts of rural Africa evidenced increasingly polarized income profiles with large pools of income diversifiers, devoid of occupational trajectories, competing with one another, lowering their average earnings, as opposed to small numbers of successful local investors with sufficient capital to go into high-yielding transport services and trade (Meagher & Mustapha, 1999).

Unlike rural Asia and Latin America, where formal waged work prevails, informal self-employment has been dominant in Africa. As opportunity costs of labor declined, employers increasingly saw rural labor as cheap and disposable. Where plantation formal wage labor had existed, it tended to become casualized (Konings, *in press*). Meanwhile, traditional labor apprenticeship arrangements disintegrated as employers became averse to investing in skills training (Meagher, *in press*). Most engaged in subsistence agricultural production, which functioned as their fallback in the event of insufficient earnings from their non-agrarian activities.

Massive numbers of rural dwellers resorted to petty trade and low capital entry services such as charcoal burning and beer brewing. Traders were vulnerable to loss of their trading capital, particularly in oversupplied local perishable food markets. It was in this context that mining became a magnetic force in mineral-rich countries, particularly those like Tanzania, where small-scale mining had been discouraged or ignored until relatively recently (Hilson & Potter, 2005).

Beyond legal constraints, the extent and nature of small-scale mining in Africa depends on an array of factors (Hilson, 2003). The richness of the mineral deposits, small-scale miners' technological capabilities, and not least the stage at which gold mining exploration, production, and export have advanced in the country. Africa has a broad range of mineral-endowed countries, from South Africa where gold mining has been pursued for over a century, to countries like Tanzania, where gold

mining as a small-scale mining activity has surged into a mass activity relatively recently through a series of gold strikes.

Generally, at the outset of being attracted to gold mining, rural dwellers experiment, as they would in any other non-agrarian income-earning activity, but there are notable differences since gold mining is, first, perceived to have potentially far higher earnings; second, it can lead its practitioners away from the security of their home areas in a quest to strike gold wherever that may occur; and third, it necessitates networking and mining skills that are generally acquired informally over time. As a consequence, compared with other activities in rural Africa, gold mining tends to attract risk-taking maximizers. Furthermore, as miners progress from one mining site to another, those who have proven competency in mining and extensive social networks affording them timely information on new strike sites and coalescing mining teams have a strong advantage (Jönsson & Bryceson, 2009).

Taking the comparison of trading and mining further, whereas trading and rural service provisioning is a competitive scramble that marginalizes many, mining can become a steeper endurance test. Unlike rural trade in petty commodity and services where purchasing power is lacking, gold has a comparatively better domestic market linked to the international gold market, which has been exceptionally buoyant in recent years.

Those attracted to small-scale mining generally enter without specialized mining skills. In effect, a miner's first work site is an apprenticeship where he earns as he learns. Gold mining is straightforward at the initial panning stage, but as gold availability "sinks deeper," technical skill is essential for finding gold. Pits usually reach 10–50 m in depth and cave-ins are not uncommon. Social skills and *esprit de corps* are equally vital. Miners have to be capable of hard work, trust, cooperation, and sobriety to successfully and safely find and extract the gold.

Having compared the mining process to trade, we consider the more marked differences with agricultural labor processes. First, it should be noted that small-scale mining generally coexists and may rely heavily on the existence of smallholder agriculture as well as trade. The relative balance between mining, agriculture, and trade in a rural mining settlement is in fact an indicator of the stage of small-scale mining underway, as will be discussed in Section 7.

Traditionally, African smallholder agriculture rested on family production units working land usually on the basis of customary usufruct rights, in long-established local communities where people had patrilineal or matrilineal ties to one another. Work tasks were generally allocated by age and gender within the confines of familial authority structures. Subsistence food production was given precedence. Cash cropping was primarily within the purview of the senior male in the family.

Mine labor at strike sites<sup>2</sup> offers a stark contrast: mobile and multi-ethnic, with a continually high turnover of non-familial people working in close contact with one another. In view of the recent surge in mining and entry of large numbers of mine laborers from agrarian and trading backgrounds, we need to ask how small-scale mining has coalesced so effectively, managing to achieve work efficiency and avoid mayhem in the production and processing of such a valuable commodity despite the deep rural poverty of the Tanzanian countryside.

The existing livelihood literature does not directly address this question.<sup>3</sup> More revealing is the current literature on labor restructuring and changing career patterns in the western world where analogous trends are occurring. Deindustrialization has altered the traditional career structures of blue and

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