Tackling Youth Unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa: Is there a role for Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining?

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Abstract

This paper argues that a formalized and supported artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector could assist immeasurably with reducing the intensity of the youth unemployment crisis which now plagues sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of the region's youth have pursued work in the ASM economy in various capacities, decisions which have brought much-needed stability in a landscape devoid of formal sector job opportunities. Host governments and donors, however, have often condemned these moves, failing to fully appreciate why youth have pursued work in ASM in the first place and the impact it has had on their livelihoods. Whilst by no means *the* solution to the youth unemployment problem in sub-Saharan Africa, heightened emphasis on formalizing and supporting ASM could certainly buy policymakers and donors some valuable time – at least in the short term – to sufficiently 're-think' their ineffective approaches to tackling the crisis.

Introduction

One of the most pressing problems in sub-Saharan Africa today is youth unemployment. The data compiled by a range of organizations in recent years paint an extremely bleak picture. At present, of the estimated 296.9 million people aged 10-24 in the region, fewer than 50 per cent are employed in the formal economy [1]. Some countries, such as Mozambique and Ghana, have youth unemployment/underemployment rates as high as 80 per cent [2]. The growing concern, however, is that despite presently being the most youthful area of the world, sub-Saharan Africa is on course to become even *younger*: due to its high fertility rate, the number of youth inhabiting the region, as a proportion of the population, is projected to exceed 75 per cent by 2015. The region will be home to nearly one quarter of the world's young people by 2025 [3].

The youth unemployment problem in sub-Saharan Africa has captured the imagination of donors and NGOs – and for good reason. Failure to engage its swelling youth populations both through education and employment has, in recent decades, proved to be a major oversight, often with catastrophic results. This is perhaps best epitomized by the case of Sierra Leone, which now ‘faces the daunting task of reclaiming a “lost generation” of youth’ who, during the country's decade-long civil war, were mobilized *en masse* by opportunistic rebels [4]. Paintin [5] provides a detailed explanation of what unfolded:

The grievances of young people stoked the fires of Sierra Leone's brutal civil war (1991-2002), with youth forming the backbone of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Indeed, the conflict has been termed by some as a ‘crisis of youth’...For many disaffected young people living on the margins of society during that period, joining fighting forces appeared to offer more than the daily exclusion they faced. The decision to fight was very much rooted in their social, economic and political consciousnesses. [p. 229-230]

For more than a decade, Sierra Leone's reconstruction efforts have focused on reengaging and empowering youth. This has proved to be an onerous undertaking, however, because of the knowledge needed and innovative solutions required to remedy the problem. In the case of schooling, for example, the vast majority of students who are now pursuing an education in the country are ‘over age’ due to ‘a late school start, repetition, or interrupted schooling’ [6, p.570]. This has no doubt put a strain on finite financial and educational resources.

But different permutations and manifestations of what is often referred to in the context of Sierra Leone as the ‘youth question’ can now be found across sub-Saharan Africa [7]. At present, an estimated 133 million – more than 50 per cent – of the region's youth are illiterate, and many more ‘have little or no skills and are therefore largely excluded from productive economic and social life’ [3]. There is broad agreement that the problem is intensifying in large part because efforts made to mobilize these idle youth have been woefully inadequate, a view which now resonates heavily in donor circles. The ILO [8], for example, attributes the region's youth unemployment crisis to the ‘skills mismatch on youth labour markets’, specifically that ‘Over-education and over-skilling coexist with undereducation and under-skilling, and increasingly with skills obsolescence brought about by long-term unemployment’ and how ‘Such a mismatch makes solutions to the youth employment crisis more difficult to find and more time consuming to implement’ (p. 1). Officials at UNECA have echoed these sentiments, reporting that in sub-Saharan Africa, ‘Unskilled young people, including socially excluded young people, such as the disabled young, and young people in conflict and post-conflict areas, are more vulnerable to economic shocks, less likely to find work and more likely to be stuck with underemployment with few opportunities to develop their potential, and are more vulnerable to demographic changes’ [9, p.7].

The ‘youth unemployment crisis’ in sub-Saharan Africa must be tackled head-on and swiftly using novel, empirically-grounded solutions. But do the region’s governments have the financial resources, logistical means and personnel at their disposal to do so and perhaps most importantly, the desire and energy to be more innovative on this front? The exercise would be daunting for even the most committed of governments. Since the turn of the century, most of sub-Saharan Africa has been preoccupied with plans formulated in line with the UN Millennium Development Goals, a ‘wish-list’ of objectives criticized for being too donor-led, overlooking the poorest groups of society, homogenizing social groups (including youth), and missing out on crucial dimensions of development, such as education and employment [10-11]. Having structured their entire development programs around, and struggled mightily to meet, these largely-unattainable targets, many African governments now find themselves depleted of the energies and creative juices needed to tackle pressing development problems. To adequately address an issue as complex as the ‘youth unemployment crisis’, therefore, host governments will require more time and space to re-evaluate their approaches.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and debate new ideas on how to bring the youth unemployment problem in sub-Saharan Africa under control. It calls on host governments to critically ‘re-think’ their stance toward, and intensify efforts to formalize and support, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) – the low-tech mineral extraction and processing activity which flourishes throughout the region. This would no doubt be challenging, given the current policy stance toward the sector in most African countries. For decades, host governments and donors have marginalized ASM operators, implementing bureaucratic regulations and licensing schemes which have *deterred* rather than encouraged prospective miners from operating legally. Until only recently, globally, ASM was viewed almost exclusively as an activity populated mainly by rogue entrepreneurs. Not surprisingly, the sector has been overlooked by donors, policymakers and NGO officials engaged in planning and development exercises in sub-Saharan Africa with regularity.

Over the past decade, however, countless studies [12-13] have emerged which draw attention to ASM’s resilience, in particular how it is one of few industries capable of enduring – and often thriving during – periods of economic hardship. Other reports [14-15] document how ASM has absorbed scores of people made redundant in other industries and government bodies, observations which have fittingly earned the sector the label, ‘poverty-driven activity’ [16]. Nowhere has this been more the case than in sub-Saharan Africa, where, over the course of the past two decades, a host of debilitating structural adjustment programs¹ have been implemented, the resulting wave of privatizations and systematic dismantling of government departments creating a sizable pool of unemployed people. The common misconception about the region’s ASM sector is that it *only* provides low-skilled positions to job-seekers when, in fact, it is a dynamic and unrivalled employment engine: in addition to scores of diggers, haulers and washers, there are numerous university graduates and former public sector workers who take up technical, managerial and skilled positions onsite. This, in large part, explains why, across sub-Saharan Africa, the sector has appealed to and engaged such an eclectic group of people. In a region of the world – sub-Saharan Africa – that has struggled mightily to generate employment and launch viable job-skilling programs in recent decades, a formalized ASM sector could provide some short-term relief for a number of host governments desperately looking to buy time in order to ‘re-think’ how to tackle mounting youth unemployment.

¹ The IMF and World Bank instituted Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to assist developing countries with stabilizing their economies and facilitating growth. To qualify for this lending, countries had to adhere to a series of stringent policy prescriptions outlined by the IMF and Bank. There ‘conditionalities’ included devaluing national currencies, removing price controls and state subsidies, privatizing state assets, and liberalizing trade.

The paper begins by highlighting the main strands of the youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. The paper then explores at greater length how ASM can potentially provide a 'stop-gap' and afford planners the much-needed time to critically re-evaluate their approaches to tackling mounting youth unemployment over the long-term. In doing so, it draws on research undertaken in rural Ghana over the past decade.

Youth Unemployment in Sub-Saharan Africa: Trends, Issues and Projections

The youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa is exceedingly complex. There is no single explanation for its recent rapid proliferation, although it certainly has several recognizable dimensions. A supported and formalized ASM sector is by no means capable of ameliorating these problems on its own. But it could certainly engage a significant number of youth in a range of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled activities over the short term, in the process, providing host governments with some 'space' and time to develop more innovative employment strategies for people aged 10-24. Before explaining how, the two main strands of the youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa are reviewed. Each has been given considerable attention in the literature.

The first dimension, or 'strand', is education. Across sub-Saharan Africa, school attendance continues to be underwhelming. Results in the classroom, therefore, have, not surprisingly, been poor. According to data recently compiled by UNESCO [17-18] some improvements have been made but overall, completion, dropout and repetition rates remain very high. In 2010, 11.4 million pupils repeated a primary grade in sub-Saharan Africa, which represented more than one third of the global total. Rates were particularly high in Burundi (36 per cent), Togo (23 per cent), Chad (23 per cent), Central African Republic (23 per cent), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (23 per cent). On average, close to one sixth of the region's pupils leave school before reaching Grade 2.

The main reason behind these high dropout rates and why education in sub-Saharan Africa, on the whole, is showing few signs of improvement or in some cases, revival, is because of the poor *quality* and *delivery* of the services being offered. Bonnet [19] provides a glimpse of the conditions many of the region's children must endure on a daily basis in their quests to obtain an education:

...there are too few schools, both for the number of children in towns and for the scattered nature of rural settlements. Packed classrooms mean that children get pushed out of school; and if the school is too far from home, children simply cannot attend classes...In the working-class districts of towns and in villages, where schools do exist, pupils are poorly seated in cramped, sometimes in dilapidated buildings, poorly protected from the elements. They can hardly hear the lesson or read the writing on the blackboard – if the blackboard and chalk are available, which is far from being the general rule. Sanitary conditions are even worse, with no latrines and no water supply. [p. 376]

The drive to provide 'free education for all' seems to have done little to ameliorate these problems, as Table 1 suggests. Several detailed studies carried out across sub-Saharan Africa cast light on why. Kagoda [20], for example, provides a comprehensive overview of the case of Uganda, where free primary education was introduced in 1997 in an attempt to fulfil pledges made in line with the Millennium Development Goals. Enrolment in the country's primary schools, however, has since swelled from 2.9 million to 8.3 million pupils but at the same time, the quality of education, particularly in its rural areas, is still poor, school infrastructure and educational teaching materials remain inadequate, and many schools lack trained teachers. This explains why, every year, close to 1.5 million pupils in Uganda do not progress to secondary school. Similarly, in Kenya, which is known for having one of the more comprehensive free primary educational programs for children in sub-Saharan Africa, in many pastoral communities, school dropout rates have skyrocketed in response to

problems which improved educational access and accompanying increased enrolment have *created*. The list includes congested classrooms, an unsustainable teacher-student ratio, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, and overstretched and underpaid instructors [21]. The high dropout rates and poor attendance at schools across sub-Saharan Africa today, therefore, are largely a result of students believing that efforts to ‘quench their thirst for learning’ in an educational system that is effectively ‘bankrupt’ are essentially futile [19, p. 376].

Table 1: State of schooling facilities in sub-Saharan Africa [17-18]

Country	Average Class Size, All Classes, Primary Public	Pupil Textbook Ratio, All Grades, Primary	Percentage of Primary Public Schools without potable water, 2012	Percentage of public primary schools without electricity, 2012
Burkina Faso	56	0.7	51.4	88.2
Burundi	53	3.4	65.2	96.4
Cameroon	N/A	12	68.7	91.4 (2011)
Central African Republic	83	1.4	75.6	100
Chad	67	5.1	85.7 (2011)	95.3 (2011)
Democratic Republic of Congo	74	1.8 (2010)	55 (2011)	88.8 (2011)
Guinea	48	1.3	79.5	97.9
Malawi	82	1.5	10.3	86.7
Mali	52 (2011)	0.9	57.4	91.7
Niger	42	1.5	86.1	97
Senegal	41	1.4 (2010)	43.6	74.2
Tanzania	61	2	56.4 (2010)	93.7 (2010)

In addition to the service itself being poor, families – many of which are straddling the poverty line – must pay a considerable amount of money to send their children to school. Even in cases where school fees are covered, there are what Bass [22] describes as ‘added costs’, or the long list of *additional* school-related expenses: monies needed for books, transport fees, uniforms, and other essential supplies, such as pencils and paper. Countless studies [23; 24] make reference to these ‘ancillary costs’ and explore how they discourage families from enrolling their children in school altogether.

A second, interrelated, dimension of the youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa is its labour market. The evidence gathered certainly points to the region’s children benefiting, economically, from schooling, despite the aforementioned challenges with gaining an education. According to data collected by Psacharopoulos and Patrinos [25], one additional year of schooling in the region yields, on average, an 11.7 per cent increase in individual earning, whilst a secondary school education nets an estimated 20 increase in earning capacity. Progression to the secondary school level in sub-Saharan Africa, however, though improving, remains underwhelming (Table 2), despite the obvious financial gains from doing so. From an early age, many of the region’s youth are expected to accumulate disposable income, pressures which require many to ‘to toil in low productivity, subsistence employment in order to support their families, with a [consequent] tremendous opportunity cost in terms of reduced educational outcomes’ [27, p. 83]. Moreover, this

early entry into the labour market prevents youth from acquiring the requisite human capital, knowledge and expertise to secure more dynamic employment over the long-term [28].

Table 2: Lower secondary school enrolment (public and private) in sub-Saharan Africa [26]

Country	2009	2010	2011	2012
Burkina Faso	375,406	439,501	498,538	560,159
Burundi	226,071	262,651	294,910	329,473
Cameroon	896,134	977,975	1,131,182	1,214,363
Central African Republic	71,702	N/A	99,756	99,186
Chad	302,478	306,639	317,174	321,921
Ghana	1,271,635	N/A	1,348,342	1,364,980
Guinea	405,842	N/A	446,151	454,605
Mali	461,339	510,651	582,995	599,353
Niger	223,988	267,442	298,222	326,143

But rather than implement more innovative ideas – in particular, devising solutions which emphasize *both* improvements to a defunct education system and the launch of innovative job-creation programs – to tackle this nuanced problem, donors and host governments have elected to adopt schemes which, for the most part, are incapable of bringing the youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa under control. Among the more fashionable strategies pursued in recent years have been programs which emphasize the development of vocational skills, increasingly seen as a panacea to the crisis. A wide range of donor and government-led youth employment programs have been launched across sub-Saharan Africa to date, enhancing vocational skills in a number of areas, including carpentry, masonry, auto mechanics, welding, tailoring and dressmaking [29].

It would be naïve, however, to believe that a series of menial skills-added training programs will resolve or adequately engage the region's young boys and girls, let alone resolve its youth unemployment crisis, on their own.² The root of the problem is, as Fluitman [30] explains, the fact that 'There are, by far, not enough wage-jobs for all currently un-or under-employed, of newly joining the labour market': in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, less than 10 percent of the labour force is made up of wage employees in the formal economy. Unfounded optimism about the impact of vocational skills training could explain why most such programs implemented in sub-Saharan Africa to date have yielded such disappointing results. In many cases, beneficiaries or operators do show signs of creativity but often lack the requisite technical knowledge and capital to expand their enterprises [30]. Recent comprehensive African Economic Outlook [3] surveys confirm as much:

Almost every African country is running Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs) to reduce unemployment and promote employment for young people...However, the track record of

² Ghana's initiative is the National Youth Employment Program (NYEP). Though developed with good intentions, it has been bedevilled with several challenges. Its viability as an appropriate means of engaging youth is open to debate. The program has proven to be woefully inadequate in sustainably dealing with the huge problems of unemployment among Ghana's youth due to the serious setbacks it suffers. By the end of 2011, the NYEP had offered jobs to only about 108,000 Ghanaians, a far cry from Dadzie's [57] projection of nearly 300,000 job placements by the end of 2010; however all aforementioned figures can still be described as statistically negligible considering the fact that this is about 2% of unemployed youth. The programme does not address the specific aspirations of the youth to secure dynamic and sustainable jobs for a sound future [57-60].

many programmes is poor and coverage is low. Among 36 AEO country experts, 21 said programmes implemented to tackle youth unemployment are dysfunctional and have a low coverage; programmes are well-developed covering more than 50% of young jobseekers in only one country (Morocco). According to a survey carried out in 19 countries...69% of respondents think that their government handles job creation badly while only 27% find that their government is dealing well with the matter. [p. 157]

This lack of success could explain why the informal sector is beginning to feature more prominently in policy dialogue around youth unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, there has certainly been a – readily-detectable – change in policy ‘mind-set’ toward the youth, employment and informality in the region. Specifically, donors, in particular the World Bank, seem to have softened their stance toward youth employment in the informal economy more generally. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa in particular, there is growing policy recognition that the informal economy ‘has two distinct sides...on the one hand, a negative manifestation of inadequate employment creation in private companies, parastatal and government services which “pushed” large numbers of jobless in informal activities...[and] On the other hand,...the positive response of the poor (and many not-so-poor) in the face of such a situation, combining their minimal resources, hard work and often a large dose of ingenuity to earn low but important incomes’ [31, p. 1].

It is in this area where a supported ASM sector could pay dividends, albeit in a very different way to how the World Bank and other donors envision informal sector industries potentially helping to bring the youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa under control. The message being conveyed in a number of donor documents (e.g. [32]) is that given its ability to provide economic relief in a region lacking job opportunities, the informal sector should be the focus of skilling exercises. Organizations appear enamoured by how ‘Most of the technical skills used in the IS [informal sector] are actually acquitted within the sector itself through traditional IS apprenticeship training (TAT)’ [31, p. 2].

But this dialogue crucially overlooks why the informal economy proliferates altogether – specifically how it is a *response* to complex or inappropriate regulatory and policy frameworks; and how, along with the occasional vocational skills development exercise, it is by no means the answer to the youth unemployment crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. The solution to the problem is rather increased employment in the formal sector which, explains Haji [33], ‘requires not just appropriate skills and training, but also public policies which lead to new employment opportunities where these skills can be used’ (p. 16). Support for informal sector activities, therefore, should rather be viewed as a ‘stop-gap’ capable of engaging youth temporarily *and* under specific conditions, whilst more innovative policy measures are devised in the areas of economic development, education and donor relations.

The discussion that follows takes the view that in sub-Saharan Africa, a formalized and supported ASM sector could help to bring the youth unemployment crisis under control but is by no means *the* solution to the problem. It has certainly become fashionable to ‘learn from the informal economy’ and, in the spirit of de Soto [34], to refine laws and policies which better meet the needs of citizens. But lost in this discussion is that, at least in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, the informal sector is so sizable because there are simply few formal sector jobs. This assumes, therefore, that if salaried employment *was* available, movement into underground trades would not occur at the rate at which it is. If alternative employment did exist, presumably, many people, including hundreds of thousands of youth, would not need to migrate to remote ASM communities in search of work.

Because of its dynamic character, low barriers to entry and its ability to provide start-up capital to finance new businesses (which creates even more informal employment), ASM has become a popular destination for African youth facing precarious employment prospects. The next section of

the paper builds a case for formalizing and supporting ASM in sub-Saharan Africa, against the background of a much bigger picture: namely, that host governments engage and develop more innovative employment generation programs for unemployed youth. Drawing heavily on evidence gathered over the past decade in Ghana, it is explained how ASM provides a much-needed platform for governments looking to ‘buy time’ to identify more comprehensive policy initiatives for youth. The paper does not seek to guide policymakers on how to develop youth employment programs; rather, it aims to explain how, by making formalized ASM more of a centrepiece of wealth-creation, a viable platform can be developed which policymakers can use as a springboard for launching more sustainable interventions.

Recognizing Small-Scale Mining as a Livelihood

The biggest barrier to promoting ASM as a ‘stop-gap’ livelihood option for youth is the orientation of existing policy frameworks. For decades, ASM has been viewed by policymakers and donors as a sector populated exclusively by ‘rag-tag’ entrepreneurs. This view was cemented following publication of the landmark report, *Small-Scale Mining: A Review of the Issues* [35], published on behalf of the World Bank. It argued that ‘a highly beneficial attribute of small enterprises for developing countries is that they are more labor-intensive than large firms and thus account for an appreciably larger share of recorded employment’. It furthermore stated that ‘The same is true for small mining operations which frequently employ large numbers of workers in rural mining districts, where job opportunities are particularly scarce’ (p. 13). The report would wield considerable influence in policymaking circles in the 1990s, spawning a collection of policies and interventions more in tune with the mindset of the ‘rogue entrepreneur’. It was not until the turn of the century that there were visible signs that governments, donors and NGOs were beginning to recognize that ASM has a livelihoods dimension which extends beyond peoples’ aspirations of ‘getting rich quickly’.

No region of the world comes remotely close to rivalling sub-Saharan Africa’s pedestrian efforts to formalize ASM. A combination of preferential treatment given to foreign large-scale miners, inappropriate licensing schemes for small-scale mining and exorbitant processing costs has discouraged the vast majority of the region’s operators from securing the requisite permits and legalizing their operations [36-37]. Some observers [e.g. 38] have accused host governments and donors of deliberately criminalizing the sector, neglecting the needs of its operators and failing to provide them with a fair opportunity to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the law. Reflecting on the recent transformation of donors’ attitudes toward ‘underground’ industries more generally, Walther [39] argued that views that ‘The image too frequently conveyed by people outside the informal sector suggests that it is a world of inflexible traditions, repetitive actions and technologies that are generally out of date’, and how ‘it is totally out of touch with changes in the modern economy’ (p. 4) were discarded. No such change has occurred with ASM policy, however, at least in the case of sub-Saharan Africa.

The lack of understanding of ASM’s complex dynamics – specifically, overlooking its livelihoods dimension – was certainly evident in the actions taken, in the early-going, to tackle rapidly-proliferating unlicensed activity head-on. Alongside epic failures to ‘sweep’ or forcibly remove unlicensed artisanal miners from parcels of land [40], there were several futile attempts made to push operators into other economic activities. Under the banner, ‘Alternative Livelihoods’, host governments and large-scale miners keen on removing encroaching artisanal operators from their concessions, implemented a series of projects. One of the region’s champions of Alternative Livelihood programs was Ghana, which at one point, had comprehensive projects at each of its major gold mines. The idea quickly gained legitimacy in policymaking circles:

Alternative livelihoods is a good idea, in the sense that we can make things available to them, because most miners go and mine as a last resort...So if there is something we can do, we could encourage them to do it, so then we will have more money to deal with the small-scale mining...³

This momentum spawned what appeared, at least on the surface, to be comprehensive employment-generation programs. The long list of interventions included the Ahafo Agribusiness Growth Initiative, which began by providing training for 1000 farm families, at Newmont Gold Mining Company's flagship Ahafo Mine; the Beposo Fish Farm and Demonstration Farm and Training Centre, which offered training in a host of activities, including livestock rearing and silkworm cultivation, established by Golden Star Resources at its Bogoso Mine; and the many alternative livelihood programs implemented by Gold Fields in communities surrounding its Tarkwa and Damang operations [41].

Most of these projects, however, have proved highly unpopular, particularly with the youth, who, despite favouring skills acquisition in popular vocations such as carpentry and masonry, have been asked to engage in agriculture. In Ghana itself, youth have grown agitated with policymakers over their disconnection with the realities on the ground and the needs of communities. Significantly, in many cases, the very farm activities being promoted were abandoned by target groups in favour of ASM in the first place. Moreover, of the few cases where these 'alternatives' have proved viable, none have provided anywhere close to the level of remuneration ASM offers. An NGO official reflected on what *needed* to be done at an early stage in order to make these Alternative Livelihoods more appealing:

All depends on how you do it. If I am doing *galamsey* [a label for illegal mining in Ghana], and you come to get the land, and you train me properly on farming then maybe I'll shift. But if you come and tell me to go off and do farming without training, then no.⁴

As for youths' stated motivation behind participating in unlicensed artisanal mining in the first place, the reasons given have remained the same for well over a decade: poverty and 'no jobs'. In 1995, the *International Roundtable on Artisanal Mining* was held at World Bank headquarters in Washington DC, where, for the first time in an international policy forum, ASM was examined in a livelihoods context, including its association with personal hardship. Delegates were in general agreement that, 'to a large extent, informal mining is a poverty-driven activity' [16, p. 1]. In Ghana, the 'poverty-driven' narrative began to take shape shortly after this workshop, despite being a period of low gold prices. Several people engaged in ASM – or, more specifically, *galamsey* – at this time shared stories during interviews, reinforcing perceptions of the sector being 'poverty-driven'. Examples include the following excerpts from interviews conducted with selected *galamsey* in the gold mining localities of Tarkwa and Bibiani in the Western Region of the country:

I am a student but because of money, I am at work here...That is why I have been transferred by my brothers...I needed money for schooling like I said...so I asked a friend in Cape Coast where I could get some extra money and he said to become a gold miner...⁵

I basically began mining right when I finished my studies...I came here because it is safe and far away...no one can bother us while I provide for my family...⁶

³ Interview, Government Official, Accra, 5 January 2003

⁴ Interview, NGO official, 15 June 2006

⁵ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 6 April 2003

⁶ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 4 December 2002

I am an illiterate...but I am self-taught...[Mining] is good money, I must say. Mining is good because...the money that I have raised is able to support the children for primary school...Without it, I would not have been able to...send the children to school...⁷

I have already explained that I have to buy bread for my family...there is no work in the country...⁸

More recent interviews conducted in the community of Japa (also in the Western Region) in March 2012 and Kobriso (Eastern Region) in July 2012 revealed much of the same. Notable examples include a young man who claimed to be a farmer in the Brong-Ahafo Region but 'came here [Japa] because of financial problems, informed by a colleague who was here for some time';⁹ a JSS graduate who, at 23 at the time of interviewing, reflected on his five-year stint in the sector, expressing gratitude over how mining in Japa has provided finance to 'pay for my children's school fees';¹⁰ and a young miner who moved to Kobriso because allegedly, 'in Akropong, I farmed to save my family [but] went into diamond mining to get money because I saw the difference from the mining'.¹¹ During interviews conducted with youth engaged in *galamsey* over the years, the recurring themes have been that in Ghana, ASM is poverty-driven and is providing immediate financial relief.

The problem, however, is that, despite evidence [15-16, 42] pointing to the growth of ASM in Ghana, and sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, being linked to personal hardship, the country's policymakers, donors and private sector partners – at least initially – were reluctant to embrace the idea. One official stated, emphatically, in an interview that 'illegal mining is not believed to be a poverty-driven activity'.¹² Certainly, the dialogue emerging in a number of interviews conducted a decade ago suggested that this may, indeed, be the case, reinforcing earlier claims that ASM is populated by 'rogue entrepreneurs' who are looking to 'get rich quickly'. For example, during one interview, a 17-year old operator said that 'I asked a friend in Cape Coast where I could earn some extra money and he said to become a gold miner'.¹³ Another stated that 'I moved from Volta Region to Tarkwa...[because] I heard that it was a rich living'.¹⁴ Research since carried out across Ghana [42-44], however, has revealed that ASM is populated mainly by individuals experiencing personal hardship of some kind, and less so by ambitious entrepreneurs. But this body of research has failed to have much of an impact on policy. Military sweeps of areas and Alternative Livelihood projects remain the centrepieces of a government strategy aimed at reducing informal ASM country-wide.

Alternative Livelihood projects in particular continue to be fiercely promoted, despite growing consensus of their ineffectiveness. When queried about this, an official at the Chamber of Mines stated, in an interview, that 'I would be surprised if none of the projects aren't working'.¹⁵ Critics, however, have drawn attention to how so few of these projects are capable of providing poverty-stricken youth with adequate remuneration. As one NGO official explained in an interview during the heyday of Alternative Livelihood projects, 'if they [the government and donors] engage the communities properly, then they would find their needs, and implement appropriate initiatives'.¹⁶

⁷ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Bibiani, 4 December 2002

⁸ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 12 April 2002

⁹ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 12 March 2012

¹⁰ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 8 March 2012

¹¹ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Kobriso, 9 July 2012

¹² Interview, official, Chamber of Mines, 12 June 2006

¹³ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 6 April 2003

¹⁴ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 4 December 2002

¹⁵ Interview, Chamber of Mines 12 June 2006

¹⁶ Interview, NGO official, 15 June 2006

As will be explained in the next section of the paper, for the youth, in the current economic climate, one such ‘appropriate’ initiative is *formalized* and *supported* ASM – at least in the short term.

Formalizing Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining: Planning for the Short-Term

Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have signed up the MDGs, which, as indicated at the outset, are a set of targets that were conceived at the turn of the century in an effort to calibrate thinking on, and to concretize goals and policies in various areas of, international development. Most donor programs implemented, since their launch, have been heavily influenced by these ambitious targets and individual pledges made to meet them. But despite initially garnering much praise, the MGDs began to attract a flood of criticisms. Fehling et al. [45] summarize these quite succinctly:

Structural concerns with the MDGs include that they are too simplistic, unachievable and have too much of a managerial approach while not identifying who is accountable for achieving them. Furthermore, reducing development objectives to a list of eight artificially separated goals risks ignoring their interconnectedness and subsequently reinforcing a vertical nature in programmes, policies, research and funding. [p. 1118]

Heavily preoccupied and overstretched with satisfying these challenging, if not impossible, targets, and bracing themselves for potentially another wave of overambitious development goals (see Moss [46]), most African governments are ill-prepared to tackle challenging problems such as youth unemployment head-on. As noted, however, given its job-creation ability even in the most poverty-stricken of environments, a formalized ASM sector could provide much-needed temporary relief and time for policymakers and donors to ‘rethink’ their approaches. Drawing heavily on interview data compiled in Ghana over the past decade, this section of the paper explains how.

The Little Things...

For many years, there have been signs that ASM is helping to stabilize African households financially. It has achieved this despite, for the most part, being unsupported by governments. The youth in particular have benefitted from ASM, both directly through income-earning and indirectly courtesy of the sector becoming a more featured economic activity in the household.

But in order to appreciate how, it is instructive to differentiate between two situations. On the one hand, there are cases where families, in precarious positions, which view ASM as a vehicle for enhancing the wellbeing of young boys and girls over the long-term. These groups use the sector as a platform to restore their livelihoods and ensure that future plans for their children come to fruition. On the other hand, there are cases where youth participation in the sector is a nuance or ‘expression’ of a society’s cultural fabric. In recent years, the NGO and donor communities have produced a flood of reports which draw attention to what is believed to be ASM’s exploitative nature across sub-Saharan Africa, citing examples of where youth are being forced into, or encouraged to leave school in order to participate in, ASM by their parents (see e.g. [13]). These situations, however, have more to do with cultural norms and less so with ASM itself. Specifically, if families value their youth working over schooling, for young girls and boys, participation in economic activities – be it fishing, agriculture or in this case, ASM – will remain high and school attendance, low. In such cases, therefore, it is the cultural fabric which must be addressed, not the industry (i.e. ASM), if the youth empowerment agenda is to move ahead.

It is the former category of situations that the present discussion is concerned with, about which there are two points worth noting. The first concerns the stability participation in ASM has provided, over the short- to medium-term, for these households. In recent years, a raft of studies [45, 47-48] have drawn attention to how scores of the region's subsistence farm households, struggling to survive in a liberalized agricultural market, have 'branched out' into ASM. For many, this move has helped to resurrect failing crops by putting them in a position to acquire crucial farm inputs such as fertilizers, which most African governments no longer subsidize. For other farm households, since 'branching out' into ASM, there has been a radical reorientation of agriculture's 'role' – specifically, that it is increasingly being viewed by the family as a source of food, rather than income [49]. As suggested by the following excerpts from interviews conducted in Ghana over a decade ago, these dynamics have prevailed in sub-Saharan Africa for some time but have been curiously overlooked:

If you know anything about farming, our government does not do anything good for the small farmer, so this makes farming a difficult profession to make money...So mining is the only alternative...I must feed the family and until I get enough money I won't be able to go back to university or technical college.¹⁷

Before Obuasi, I worked on a cocoa plantation way to the west of here, near to the Ivory Coast border...Very, very low wages for picking the beans...After a few years in the poor cocoa plantations, we had to move...Originally, my wife and I and our first child went to Kumasi to look for work...I even had training in blacksmith and typing but couldn't get a job...so I heard word that gold mining was beginning to boom to the west in Bibiani, so I came down...¹⁸

Mining, as I have said but I was a farmer about ten years ago...now, there is no money in farming...the rains are too inconsistent and the crop yields are too low.¹⁹

In each case, an injection of monies from ASM has helped to put the individual in question back on track, providing some stability in a climate where there are sparingly few job prospects.

Second, by moving into ASM, many youth, no longer preoccupied with trying to support their families financially, have been afforded some freedom to think more strategically about themselves – more specifically, their education. As explained at the outset, in sub-Saharan Africa, school-going youths face a number of challenges which are significant enough to discourage even the most conscientious of learners. Crowded classrooms and scarce financial and educational resources make effective teaching challenging, particularly in remote areas. A comprehensive education, therefore, likely entails pursuing programs in private institutions or the next 'tier' of public school not necessarily covered by 'education for all' policies but which have better-quality facilities. Doing so requires additional income, however; and, more often than not, the onus of responsibility falls on the aspiring youth to obtain it.

The scores of youth across sub-Saharan Africa who have pursued employment at mine sites have often found themselves working alongside their parents. Countless NGO reports have drawn attention to this phenomenon, in the vast majority of cases calling on policymakers and donors to tackle it. A recent report published by PACT [50], for example, reports that across Katanga Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 'In the event that no schools are nearby or where children have been excluded from school for some reason (e.g., nonpayment of fees, school closure, lack of teachers, learning difficulties, behavioral difficulties, prolonged periods of absence without access to

¹⁷ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Asin Fosu, 30 July 2002

¹⁸ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Bibiani, 4 January 2003

¹⁹ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 12 April 2002

remedial education, or family migration), the children may automatically go to the mine with their working parents instead of to school' (p. 17). The NGO Human Rights Watch reported much of the same in Tanzania [51].

But further analysis reveals that the situation is far more complex than is often diagnosed. Many youth pursue work in ASM to *improve* their livelihoods, not necessarily to avoid schooling. A study [52] conducted in Kenya, for example, reported, *inter alia*, that '[many parents interviewed] argue that their children only work at the mines during weekends and school holidays' (p. 266). Hilson [53] drew similar conclusions from survey work conducted in Northern Ghana, reporting that local youth were, indeed, engaging in ASM to finance their education, *and* were doing so after school hours. Detailed testimonials gathered from the field over the years validate these points even further. Carisch [54], for example, provided a series of detailed accounts of children's struggles in ASM camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The following was particularly enlightening:

11-year-old Alphonse Kitambala is also trying to use his earning wisely. For the time being, he goes to school in the morning and then works with a gang of other boys in the afternoon at the mining site of Kisitu. "With the money I make from the gold I can pay my school fees and the other things I need," explained Alphonse. "Sometimes we find nothing, but there are days when I go home with 2000 Francs in my pocket." [p. 10]

Hilson and Potter [14] reported similar phenomena in Ghana over a decade ago. Although the price of gold was much lower at this time, for the miners consulted, the money received was still significant. This same message has since consistently been conveyed in interviews conducted with miners in different areas of the country. Notable excerpts from interviews include the following:

I am a student but because of money I am at work here. That is why I have been transferred by my brothers. I need money to continue...I finished my basic education but because I want to continue I need money...²⁰

I want money to further my education...I want to go to training college...I want to be a teacher...by the end of this year, I will stop the work and go to college...²¹

I am using monies to pay for school fees...I have been mining here for five years...²²

I was a farmer and second, I was a rubber planter...the industries netted me no money and plus, I spent so much time selling off my stuff at market...²³

Reports condemning youth participation fail to take stock of the bigger picture: that school-going boy and girls often pursue employment in industries such as ASM to improve their livelihoods over the long term. Whilst these actions should by no means be encouraged, it is crucial that they are seen as a *response* by youth to the circumstances they find themselves facing today and the choices they must make in the absence of viable employment. For policymakers and donors, it more importantly reveals that despite facing very difficult situations and having few life options, youth are still adamant about pursuing an education.

²⁰ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Tarkwa, 6 April 2002

²¹ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Kobriso, 10 July 2012

²² Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 8 March 2012

²³ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Asin Fosu, 12 September 2002

Bigger and Better Things?

Policymakers and donors who are sceptical about having formalized ASM feature more in local economic development and youth employment strategy specifically can take solace in the fact that the sector is not only helping to satisfy the immediate needs of school-aged boys and girls but is also putting them in a position to improve their livelihoods over the medium- to long-term. It has accomplished this, for the most part, *outside* of formal sector frameworks. Many of the well-documented social ‘ills’ associated with ASM communities in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere – being location where, *inter alia*, money is squandered on alcohol, drugs and prostitutes [36, 55-56]) – are certainly a result of activities being confined to the informal sector, in which individuals are challenged to manage their finances prudently. One miner interviewed in Ghana toward the middle of last decade, a time when the gold price was steadily recovering, was particularly vocal about this, calling for the government to provide education on how to manage their money and patronize rural banks to deposit earnings:

[we] need capital [but] the way one can be trained to use the money. You cannot give someone five million [Ghana *cedis*] and if you don’t train, in 2-3 months, the money is gone. You need to organize workshops on how to sensitize people on how to manage money.²⁴

Over the years, there have been countless reports of miners having squandered their funds on luxury items such as watches, cars, jewellery and clothing.

But this does not necessarily mean that ASM *cannot* catalyze economic development in sub-Saharan Africa over the medium- to long-term. Many of the region’s miners have had the foresight to invest their monies in worthwhile ventures. Werthmann [56], for example, reported that, in Burkina Faso, some female miners have invested monies in plots of land – often in their home towns – on which they have constructed houses that they rent out. Similarly, Carisch [54], during the course of research conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, encountered young male miners who claimed to be investing their earnings in houses. Much of the same has happened in Ghana over the past two decades. A local government officer marvelled, during an interview, over how, amid persistent poverty, ASM has catapulted many youth along a different development trajectory altogether:

[I have been in this post] five years now. I have seen a change in miners. They are investing, putting away monies, putting up hotels, buying cars...²⁵

It has reached the point in many areas of Ghana where, as one miner explained in an interview, ‘now, we see university graduates getting into *galamsey* mining’.²⁶

This is by no means a new phenomenon in Ghana, possibly because of a lack of alternative employment. Individuals are, indeed, making the most of their situations. One licensed operator interviewed in Tarkwa in 2002 reported having gone to the Tarkwa School of Mines (now the University of Mines and Technology), inspired by his grandfather, who, it was explained, was a goldsmith. At the time of interviewing, he claimed to have 200 employees, including another geologist, spread across three concessions.²⁷ Another, who claimed to have two certificates from the polytechnic and a university degree, began pooling financial resources with friends and acquiring

²⁴ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Prestea, 14 June 2006

²⁵ Interview, local government official, Bogoso, 18 May 2009.

²⁶ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 8 April 2010.

²⁷ Interview, registered miner, Tarkwa, 4 April 2002.

equipment. At the time of interviewing, he was far removed from his teaching training, and only interested in investing monies in mining.

The message for governments in sub-Saharan Africa, therefore, is clear: that informal ASM is not only capable of satisfying the immediate needs of youth populations but can also provide a much-needed temporary platform for achieving medium- to long-term development goals. It is high time that the conventional, archaic views of ASM are abandoned.

Conclusion: Planning for the Future

Why are African governments so reluctant to make ASM a greater point of emphasis in local economic development and planning? Is it an unwillingness to embrace new ideas, or simply a case of ignorance? At a time when donors are clearly struggling to identify viable employment-generation strategies for African youth, it seems inconceivable that ASM is being overlooked to the extent that it is. As captured in the previous section of this paper, the sector has provided an important source of income for hundreds of thousands of youth and their families, and has done so relatively unsupported, largely *outside* of the formal economy and often under very difficult circumstances. For many youth, it has provided much-needed stability during times of uncertainty.

The region's government officials and to some extent, donors, have little idea about how activities have reinvigorating the lives of discouraged youth and give many a sense of purpose in otherwise-hopeless situations. Gaining a better appreciation of ASM's importance in the context of youth livelihoods, therefore, is certainly a key to facilitating a badly-needed change in attitude towards the role of the sector in the context of local economic development. During episodes of fieldwork conducted in Ghana between 2002 and 2003, many miners interviewed called on the government to give greater priority to ASM formalization on its agenda. It is no secret that Ghana has in place some of the most bureaucratic regulations for small-scale mining, a framework which has *discouraged* operators from securing a license [38]. But this is by no means unique to Ghana. It rather seems to be the case across sub-Saharan Africa [36], a telling indication of ASM's 'afterthought' status in the region's development policy.

In Ghana, initially, calls for a more streamlined ASM formalization process were being made mainly by redundant large-scale mine workers. Not surprisingly, these 'lifetime' operators quickly found a home in ASM, and once re-establishing themselves, began lobbying the government to simplify the licensing system and to support the sector through a suite of financial and technological interventions. As the gold price began increasingly precipitously, youth began to join these established miners in their camps, rapidly making use of what little sector support was available – including a rag-tag small-scale mining association devoid of funding and the occasional conference – to voice similar sentiments. As informal ASM activity began expanding, unabated, country-wide, attracting masses of youth in the process, the government came up with some rather interesting labels for those engaged in *galamsey*, including 'rapists', 'armed robbers' and 'criminals'. Reflecting on this, one *galamsey* operator in Japa remarked, in an interview, that:

[Sure (laughing) if...] Most of them (the *galamsey*) are armed robbers or criminals...Most of the *galamsey* people are prisoners, so if they are not working, they will find other ways to get money...Most people have stopped armed robbery because of *galamsey*.²⁸

The implication here is that ASM is *engaging* people. If this was not the case, idle youth would no doubt be involved in criminal activities. Why, then, has the government deliberately avoided embracing this side of the story? As another Kobriso-based *galamsey* operator put it in an interview,

²⁸ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 11 March 2012

‘There is no work in Ghana here, only *galamsey*, there are over 2000 here...so if there is no work, no *galamsey*, what do they do?...They will rob you’.²⁹

There is a sense, from communications with youth pushed into *galamsey* over the years, that many choose to engage in the sector because – as paradoxical as it may seem – they genuinely believe that doing so will lead to a more prosperous future for themselves and their children. This is certainly evident from the following excerpts from interviews conducted with selected *galamsey* operators:

Not want my child to do *galamsey* because it is tedious. I will make sure kids will go to school, don’t want them to suffer like them JSS here, SS in Akropong and university in Legon.³⁰

No *galamsey* man will send their son or daughter to do *galamsey*.³¹

If this is indeed the case, the motives for engaging in illegal mining are genuine. The problem, however, is that whilst these individuals are willing to make enormous sacrifices for the benefit of their children, their movement into informal ASM activity continues to be interpreted by policymakers and donors as simply a move to ‘get rich quick’.

As the case study analysis from Ghana presented here has shown, in sub-Saharan Africa, ASM is engaging youth, and has proven to be a valuable source of income in even the most precarious of situations. This paper is by no means advocating the sector’s formalization as a solution to the region’s mounting youth unemployment crisis. But to hastily dismiss it as an industry populated solely by ‘rogue’ entrepreneurs and which, in no way, could assist with diffusing this very serious problem, would be exceedingly premature.

²⁹ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Kobriso, 10 July 2012

³⁰ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 12 March 2012

³¹ Interview, *galamsey* operator, Japa, 11 March 2012

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