

The Role of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Zimbabwe's Economic Transformative Agenda

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ABSTRACT

The extractive industry has become one of the major drivers of Zimbabwe's economy, both at the micro and macro-levels. In the face of continued economic deterioration, rising levels of unemployment and poverty, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), has provided one of the few opportunities for survival and income generation. The research is mainly qualitative in nature as it sought to explore on the phenomenon of artisanal gold mining with a special focus on its ability to directly and /or indirectly transform the economic well-being of those involved in the industry. The major finding of the study was that, indeed, artisanal and small-scale gold mining has contributed significantly to the growth of the mining industry in Zimbabwe while also sustaining the livelihoods of the majority of the poor who depend on the sector for their well-being. However, patronage politics in the form of elite accumulation, leakages along the mineral supply value chain as well as the informal and illegal nature of most of the activities have compromised the viability and sustainability of the sector. The study, therefore, recommends that the proper regulation, policing and formalisation of the sector should be prioritised to maximise the gains that can be realised from it.

Keywords: Poverty, artisanal mining, economic development, livelihoods

"The mining industry might make wealth and power for a few men and women, but the many would always be smashed and battered beneath its giant treads." (Prichard, 1946)

INTRODUCTION

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining is increasingly becoming a lifeline for a majority of vulnerable people across the globe and most specifically in those developing countries with limited economic opportunities and which are endowed with natural mineral resources. Even though mining itself is not sustainable as minerals are depletable, the activity can lead to sustainable development through the creation of economic linkages, which subsequently lead to the transformation of the extractive sector into an economically viable entity (Mlambo, 2016). Artisanal mining can be defined as a practice that ranges from being a totally informal kind of subsistence mining using rudimentary handheld tools to small-scale mechanised operations that involve the setting up of small-scale processing plants (Paisner, 2021). Globally, ASGM sustains livelihoods for close to 10 million people in over 80 countries (Blore, Kroll & Telmer, 2020). Indirectly, however, the number is even much higher and the

The World Bank (2020) estimates that around 100 million people worldwide depend on ASGM for their well-being. In Zimbabwe, research has revealed that artisanal mining sustains the livelihoods of at least 2 million people (ZELA, 2021). Considering the relatively small population of the country which stands at 14.8 million (UN Zimbabwe, 2021), this can be considered as statistically significant in terms of the sector's contribution to national human well-being and the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal number one, which aims at poverty reduction. This is, however, against the backdrop of ASGM being largely considered as an informal and illegal entity.

This exploratory study, therefore, aims at revealing the extent to which artisanal mining has economically transformed the country's fortunes by creating employment opportunities, thereby assisting millions of

Zimbabweans in escaping from the poverty trap in the face of the country's deteriorating state of the economy. A close examination of the push factors that have led a majority of the rural and urban poor to join the highly risky and laborious extractive sector will be undertaken. The study will also establish the main actors that are involved in ASGM with an aim to explore the social dynamics that are inherent within the sector. Last but not least, the paper will assess the various challenges encountered in artisanal mining and come up with strategies on how to build up and strengthen resilience within artisanal mining communities in order to enhance the sector's contribution to national economic development while also promoting sustainable livelihoods in the country.

Understanding economic transformation and poverty in the context of artisanal and small-scale mining

Economic transformation is key to sustainable development and poverty reduction as it entails an expansion in the productive capacities of an economy, which is accompanied by employment creation. As stipulated in the 2030 Agenda, economic transformation is understood as fundamental changes in the economy that lead to increased productivity levels, creation of adequate employment opportunities as well as the equitable distribution of income and wealth, among other development indicators (UNSDG, 2020). Artisanal mining is a largely poverty-driven sector, and the growth of the ASGM sector in Zimbabwe has contributed to the country's economic transformative agenda as it has opened employment opportunities for the majority of the rural and urban poor. Research has revealed that more than 60 percent of the population of Zimbabwe is below the age of 35 and most of these supposed to be economically active people have no access to decent education and work (Muchemwa, 2019). Consequently, most of these economically marginalised populations have found refuge in the artisanal mining sector where they have found some form of employment and livelihood.

Poverty has been defined in so many different yet seemingly interrelated ways. Goulden & D'Arcy (2014) simply define poverty as when a person's resources are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs. In other words, it can be described as a state of relative deprivation. A number of scholars agree that poverty has multiple dimensions that build upon each other. These are, financial, economic, material, political, environmental as well seasonal dimensions (Chambers, 2012; Devereux, 2012; Hick, 2016). It is, therefore, essential to explore how these various dimensions of poverty have pushed so many people into joining the otherwise precarious sector of artisanal mining. According to Chamunogwa (2021), reports by the World Food Programme (WFP), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Zimbabwe Vulnerable Assessment Committee (ZIMVAC) revealed that over 8 million Zimbabweans (60 percent) of the population faced hunger and general food insecurity. Given this difficult scenario, many have been left with little or no option but to join artisanal mining as way of escaping from the poverty trap.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

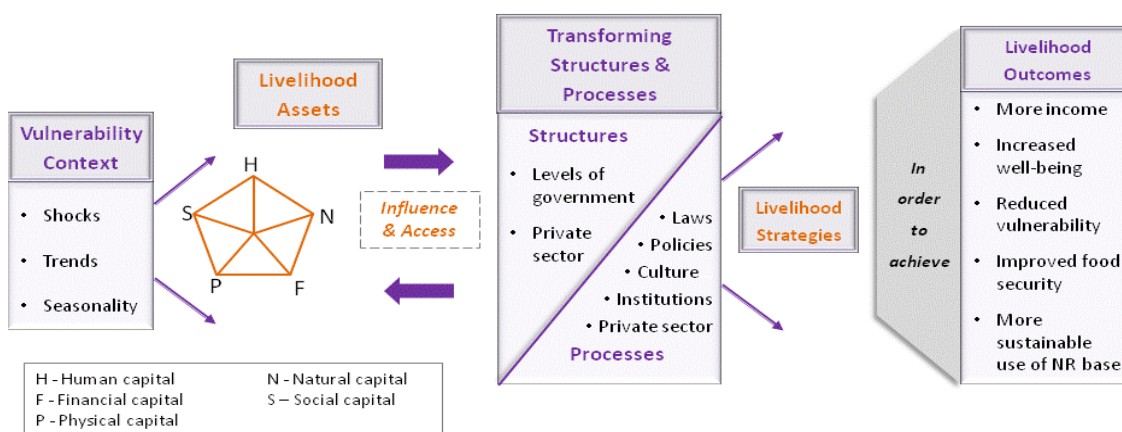


Fig. 1 Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (DFID, 2000)

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) largely informs this study. A livelihood can be defined as assets, capabilities as well as activities necessary for one to attain a means of living (DFID, 2000). As illustrated in Fig.1, the SLF was found to be appropriate for this study as it clearly depicts the push factors (vulnerability context) that have driven a large majority of artisanal miners to turn to their natural mineral resources (livelihood assets) using a variety of livelihood strategies (digging, processing, trading etc. of the mineral ore), in order to sustain their livelihoods and move away from poverty (livelihood outcomes).

METHODOLOGY

A combination of critical content analysis and qualitative research methodologies were adopted in this study. Empirical evidence was gathered from in depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from a conveniently selected sample of artisanal miners. Key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders were also conducted in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the dynamics that exist within the artisanal mining sector.

An overview of Zimbabwe's poverty and development trajectory

Zimbabwe's economy has experienced both periods of economic growth and decline ever since the Southern African nation gained its political independence from British colonial rule in 1980. Agriculture and mining have formed the major pillars of Zimbabwe's economy since it gained its independence. However, from the turn of the new millennium in 2000, Zimbabwe began to experience a dramatic fall in its economic fortunes. A study by the Zimbabwe Peace Project reveals that the standard of living in Zimbabwe has generally declined due to poor economic performance, protracted political and governance crisis that has spanned for decades, inconsistent and ineffective government policies, widespread corruption as well recurrent droughts and environmental disasters induced by climatic changes (Chamunogwa, 2021). All these factors, combined with the shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic, further slowed down the country's economic recovery efforts and have contributed to the rise in poverty amongst the general Zimbabwean populace.

The government of Zimbabwe made a number of economic and political decisions that have had adverse impacts on its general economic performance. For instance, the government's decision to pay \$50 000 gratuities outside the budget to each of the thousands of war veterans as compensation in 1997 and the government's subsequent involvement in the costly Democratic Republic of Congo War in 1998 plunged the country into economic doldrums. As the country's financial reserves dried up, the government resorted to printing more money, a move which resulted in widespread hyperinflation of the Zimbabwean dollar (Louis, 2021). More so, the Zimbabwean government's decision to engage in the controversial Fast Track Land Reform Programme in 2000 attracted a lot of international condemnation and dampened its diplomatic relations resulting in the imposition of sanctions which also worsened the country's economic performance and plunged millions of ordinary people into poverty. Additionally, due to the ill-planned and poorly executed Fast Track Land Reform Programme, Zimbabwe moved from being a regional bread basket and exporter of grains such as wheat and maize to being an importer of food as white productive farmers had left and resettled in neighbouring countries such as Zambia and South Africa.

Poverty levels have significantly increased over the past two decades in Zimbabwe. Half of Zimbabwe's 14.8 million people live below the food poverty line and about 3.5 million children face chronic hunger (Louis, 2021). Similarly, the country registered a low score of 0.571 in the human development category of the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2019, coming at position 150 out of the 189 countries worldwide. It is also estimated that the number of extremely poor increased from 4.5 million in 2017 to 6.0 million in 2019 (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2020). UNICEF (2021) further notes that in 2020, close to half of the Zimbabwean population was facing extreme poverty as a result of the combined effects of a dramatic rise in prices of basic commodities, poor harvest as well as the economic contraction ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic. All these negative socio-economic developments worsened the vulnerability of the general Zimbabwean populace forcing many to join the informal sector, particularly, artisanal mining which has now become a safety net and source of livelihood for many.

Artisanal gold mining: A lifeline for Zimbabwe's rural and urban poor

When poverty hits and people are left with limited options, they turn to their natural resources for economic refuge. Zimbabwe is naturally endowed with large mineral deposits amongst other natural endowments. The country's mining industry has great potential as Zimbabwe is home to the Great Dyke, which happens to be the second biggest platinum deposit in the world. Other major minerals found in the country include diamonds, chrome, nickel and coal. Additionally, the country is endowed with more than 4000 gold deposits (Louis, 2021). While there are a number of established gold mining companies in Zimbabwe, it is interesting to note that artisanal gold mining has become a major source of gold production, surpassing the formal gold output of large scale mining operations. For instance, in 2018, gold deliveries from the artisanal mining sector overtook deliveries from the large scale mining operations and this clearly proved the centrality of the mining sector to the country's economy (Mkodzongi & Zano, 2020). Apparently, gold happens to be the country's primary export and the bulk of the gold (63 percent) is being produced by artisanal gold miners (LSE, 2021). As a result of this huge contribution to the national economy, artisanal mining can no longer be considered as a marginal economic activity. The Africa Mining Vision (AMV) which is a continental blueprint for promoting the sustainable utilisation of mineral resources also acknowledges the important role of artisanal mining as an engine of economic growth. One of its tenets specifically touches on the need to harness the potential of small-scale and artisanal mining so as to improve livelihoods as well as to optimise knowledge and benefits of mineral resources at all levels of mining (Hilson, 2020). Thus, the significance and central role of artisanal mining in socio-economic development is gradually gaining currency both locally and internationally.

DISCUSSION OF STUDY'S FINDINGS

From the interviews and Focus Group Discussions carried out with the artisanal miners at one selected artisanal mining site in the mining town of Bindura, in Zimbabwe's Mashonaland Central Province, lack of employment, combined with the increasing economic hardships emerged as the top push factors that were driving people into artisanal mining. An official from the Zimbabwe Miners Federation (ZMF), Mashonaland Central Division, remarked that approximately 50 000 small-scale miners are registered under the representative body with each miner employing at least 10 workers. He further intimated that an even bigger number is not registered by ZMF as they are involved in artisanal mining which is considered illegal. The majority of men and women working at the mining campsite pointed out that poverty had forced them to get into artisanal mining despite the risks and insecurities that characterise the sector. Thus, these economic shocks of unemployment and the rise in cost of living aggravated the vulnerability of these poor people, forcing them to turn to artisanal gold mining as a livelihood strategy. One of the male participants (a father of six children) who had been in artisanal mining for close to 4 years now indicated that;

Before I joined chikorokoza (artisanal mining in the Shona Language) I was working at Irvines (one of Zimbabwe's biggest chicken producing companies) until I was retrenched as the company scaled down operations due to the worsening economic conditions. I was left with no option but to join artisanal mining as I had to fend for my family as the breadwinner.

This, therefore, shows how the declining economic performance of the country has increased the vulnerability of ordinary people, thereby prompting them to join the artisanal mining sector as a way to secure their livelihoods. Mkodzongi and Zano (2020) similarly observed that the growing economic crisis combined with the decreasing rural livelihoods in agriculture compelled an increasing number of people to turn to artisanal mining as a means of seeking a livelihood. Thus, it can be argued that, indeed, artisanal mining has become a way out of poverty for many in Zimbabwe.

In a focus group discussion with some female artisanal miners at the gold mining site, one of the women, a middle-aged widow explained how she ventured into artisanal mining in the aftermath of her husband's death.

Life became difficult after the death of my husband, and I was left with two children of school going age. I tried to venture into farming, but due to the high cost of inputs, I struggled to make ends meet until I decided to join artisanal mining so that I could pay school fees and provide food for my children.

These sentiments further illuminate the role that artisanal mining is playing in bettering the livelihoods of disadvantaged members of the society. A study by Southern African Resource Watch, a regional NGO which focuses on the sustainable use of natural resources substantiates this claim by highlighting the fact that among the unemployed and urban and rural poor, artisanal mining offers a form of employment at a time when the country is experiencing macro-economic challenges, chief amongst them; high levels of unemployment, cash shortages, rising prices of basic necessities as well as general economic stagnation (Southern African Resource Watch, 2020). Thus, artisanal mining has become a major means of survival for the majority of ordinary Zimbabwean citizens.

Division of labour and social differentiation within the artisanal mining sector

The artisanal mining sector is not a homogeneous entity. While the majority of artisanal miners are found at the lower end of the mineral supply chain, some have managed to navigate their way to become capitalist operators by acquiring mining claims and mining equipment as well as buying gold for resale at a profit. More so, there is a growing trend of 'sponsors', mainly composed of politicians, businessmen, senior security personnel as well as Chinese investors who are financing artisanal mining operations (Mkodzongi & Zano, 2020). Thus, artisanal mining has become so broadened in terms of its scope as it has generated a range of upstream and downstream businesses. Consequently, artisanal mining has become quite a socially differentiated sector where some miners have become more equal than others due to changing social dynamics.

Challenges faced and problems posed by artisanal miners

Artisanal miners face numerous challenges in as far as their operations are concerned. The most common obstacles that came out from the interviews and focus group discussions were the occasional arrests by the police due to the informal and illegal nature of their operations, unfair gold pricing structure, violence or attacks from other more powerful mining gangs as well as occupational hazards such as mine collapse. All the participants cited their lack of mining claims as the major challenge to their ability to meaningfully participate in the sector. According to the artisanal miners, a mining claim is not easy to get as it requires a considerable amount of money and none of the miners appeared to have a clear figure of how much it would cost to have a mining licence with estimates ranging from US\$500 to US\$2000.

Closely related to the lack of mining claims and the informal nature of the sector is the issue of pricing. According to the miners, they were not able to sell their gold at formal markets as they were not licenced. As a result they would sell to the local buyers at a lesser price, a practice which even promotes illicit gold trade and leakages thereby, undermining official revenue flows to the state. One participant revealed that; *"local buyers offer US\$85 per gram of gold and then they sell at around US\$100 per gram at the official market or even more, when they export."* Thus, the informal and illegal nature of artisanal mining has prejudiced both the miners and the state at large and the government needs to urgently address the issue if it is to achieve more value from gold.

Another challenge that artisanal miners have to grapple with is that of violence from other powerful and armed gangs who terrorise them and confiscate their mineral ore. Violence has been a major feature in every mining community in Zimbabwe. From the responses that came out from the interviews that were conducted, it was reported that armed gangs were coming from a nearby location called Batanai and they were terrorising them by demanding their gold and other valuables, such as money. The miners highlighted that they were helpless in the face of these armed gangs, and they could not report them to the police since their mining operations were deemed illegal. As a response to the growing acts of violence, the Zimbabwe Republic Police launched an operation code named *"Operation Chikorokoza Ngachipere"* (No to Anarchy by Artisanal Miners) and another operation *"Operation Stop Artisanal Mining"* in early January 2020 which resulted in the arrest of 4570 artisanal miners across the country (Centre for Natural Resource Governance, 2020). However, despite these efforts, violence continues to be a menace in the mining communities of Zimbabwe.

The risk of mine collapse is quite high in the artisanal mining sector due to a lack of occupational health and safety mechanisms. Most of these mine collapses happen in closed and disused mines. One of the interviewed participants narrated how he narrowly escaped death when he was buried underneath one of the disused mining

shafts at Ran mine which had long been closed. Fellow artisanal miners came to his rescue, but he broke his leg in the process and it took him close to 6 months to recover from the injuries. These cases and most of them fatal, are a frequent feature in the news headlines. Thus, it can be argued that the high levels of poverty being experienced in the country have forced the majority of poor people to take huge risks in an effort to sustain their livelihoods.

Environmental degradation as a result of artisanal mining

Due to the aforementioned economic hardships, people have resorted to digging anywhere and everywhere they suspect to be having gold deposits. In Zimbabwe, gold deposits are randomly distributed and the rampant gold prospecting activities have caused a lot of environmental damage. The uncontrolled use of mercury and cyanide in the processing of gold has also posed a huge environmental challenge as it has led to the contamination of water bodies, putting the lives of millions of people at risk. The Environmental Management Agency formed through an act of Parliament, the Environmental Management Act (Chapter 20:27) of 2002 is responsible for ensuring the sustainable utilisation of natural resources in order to combat environmental degradation. The Agency has faced challenges in controlling and regulating the activities of artisanal mining as some of the miners are affiliated to more powerful people such as high ranking security officials and politicians. As such, the agency becomes a toothless bulldog in as far as its efforts to bring order to the sector are concerned.

Elite accumulation and mineral leakages as hindrances to Zimbabwe's agenda of economic transformation

While artisanal and small-scale mining has been described as a largely poverty-driven entity, existing evidence has revealed that this has not always been the case in Zimbabwe as senior civil servants, politicians and security forces are key players in the sector and the informal economy in general (Mawowa, 2013). The majority of artisanal miners hail from poor backgrounds and they lack capital and equipment to meaningfully engage in the industry. As a result, as Mkodzongi & Spiegel (2019) argue, they get into exploitative labour relations with those in possession of the key resources and mining rights, commonly referred to as the 'sponsors' who tend to dominate the ASM value chain owing to their ability to recruit labour, purchase the ore at cheaper prices and then marketing it at a profit. Consequently, this has led to a new wave of primitive accumulation with quite a huge tonnage of the precious minerals being smuggled through the porous borders (Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2019). Against this background of elite accumulation, it can be argued that in terms of economic growth and development, the sector has minimally benefited the entire economy. In fact, the nepotism and greed that characterise the industry have resulted in wealth accumulation by a few individuals (Malinga, 2018). As Mawowa (2013) further observes, the structure of control over artisanal mining clearly points to the fact that high political office and accumulation go hand in glove. More so, the informal nature of the sector has made the smuggling of minerals much easier. According to CNRG (2022), Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) in the artisanal mining sector are the cause of an estimated 3 tonnes of gold leakages every month. Similarly, a report by ENCA (2020) revealed that approximately US \$1.5 billion worth of gold is being smuggled outside the country's borders every year. Gold leakages are being encountered at different phases of the mineral supply chain, mostly, at the mining, milling and transportation levels (CNRG, 2022). As such, these leakages mean that fiscally, the country registers no benefits as the government is deprived of revenue and essential foreign exchange which could be instrumental in driving the country's economic transformative agenda.

Patronage politics is not only akin to the artisanal gold mining industry. When diamonds were discovered in Marange in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe in 2006, the same scenario prevailed. As Scoones (2017) argues, the Marange diamond experience provides an important lens on Zimbabwe's tortured politics as it reflects the control of the elite over the country's political economy. According to Hawkins (2009), the discovery of the precious stones in Marange escalated the illegal trading of minerals to a higher level and the government only intervened in 2008 after massive looting and smuggling of the precious minerals. Resultantly, as Scoones (2017) further observes, the illicit sale of the diamonds lined up the pockets of the few who had power and influence. Such enormous leakages in the mineral supply and value chain prejudices the state of significant financial revenue which could be used to drive and boost the national economy.

The high profile case of the Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Miners Federation, Henrietta Rushwaya illustrates the magnitude of the gold leakages in the mining sector. Rushwaya was arrested with close to 6kgs of pure gold enroute to Dubai (Zimlive, 14 June, 2021). Such levels of misconduct and illegal trading have dire consequences for the entire economy as only a few stand to benefit at the expense of the generality of the population. Most importantly, the smuggling of the precious minerals is quite retrogressive in as far as the realisation of the country's economic transformative agenda is concerned. With the practice of elite accumulation firmly entrenched within the sector, development becomes exclusive rather than inclusive. The weak legislative instruments in the mining industry have been blamed for the rise in illicit deals in the sector. According to a report by the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), the 1961 Mines and Minerals Act which regulates the mining industry is outdated and inefficient as it has been amended several times. More so, the Act gives the Minister too much power and authority to make unilateral decisions over the country's mining prospects, a situation which has detrimental social and economic effects (CNRG, 2013). Further, a policy and legal vacuum exists when it comes to artisanal and small-scale mining and this has contributed to the chaos that characterises the sector in terms of its structural organisation and regulatory framework. Thus, it is imperative for new mining legislation to be enacted that will be able to effectively address contemporary challenges within the sector. This will also help in boosting the mining sector's contribution to the national revenue base and overall economic development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Artisanal gold mining has become a major economic activity that is sustaining the livelihoods of the majority of the urban and rural poor in Zimbabwe while also contributing to the national GDP. The high levels of unemployment, combined with the rise in cost of living due to the hyper inflationary environment have forced many to turn to artisanal mining as a way to escape from poverty. However, despite the centrality of this role being played by artisanal mining, the sector is regarded as largely informal and illegal which makes the artisanal miners more prone to victimisation, occupational and health hazards as well as being at a disadvantaged position when it comes to the selling of their gold. Realistically, the statistical contribution of the artisanal and small-scale gold mining sector has not been accompanied by positive socio-economic outcomes especially in terms of wealth distribution. The majority of artisanal miners work mainly to meet their subsistence needs, while the few elites who have access to power and control reap huge profits. Elite accumulation and the smuggling of the precious minerals through the country's porous borders have also undermined the potential of the sector in optimally contributing to the country's economic transformative agenda. The study, therefore recommends that the government should quicken its pace in formalising and regularising the artisanal mining sector so that it becomes a safer and more secure space for the millions of people who are eking out a living from the sector. The formalisation of the sector will help in ensuring transparency and accountability thereby enabling the government to tap into the existing potential of the sector. More importantly, formalisation will go a long way in ensuring inclusive and people-oriented development as enshrined in its National Development Strategy One, which is the first part of Zimbabwe's national development strategy, Vision 2030 and the 2030 development agenda. The pricing of gold should also be competitive in order to be attractive to local producers. Synergies between the established mining firms and the artisanal miners should also be encouraged as a way to support the growth and formalisation of the artisanal mining sector.

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