

GALAMSEY & ILLEGAL MINING IN GHANA

THE PERSPECTIVES OF TONY DOGBE



Small-scale mining, popularly known as 'galamsey' in the sub-Saharan country of Ghana, is a fast-growing phenomenon that is present in several other countries with underground mineral resources. Coined from the English phrase, "gather and sell", galamsey has become a subject of great concern for governmental agencies, the private sector, local community leaders, as well as citizens in general. In search of precious minerals, especially gold, which abounds in several regions of the mineral-rich country of Ghana, several people engage in the practice for a wide spectrum of reasons. It is reported that about 1.1 million Ghanaians are direct participants in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), and as many as 4.4 million more people are dependent on the proceeds from galamsey (Hilson & McQuilken, 2014). As such, experts do not deny that small-scale mining represents an opportunity to alleviate poverty and provide sustainable development in Ghana, not only within the communities where it is practiced such as the Bibiani, Bolgatanga, Dunkwa and Tarkwa mining districts of the country, but also in the general Ghanaian economy as a whole. As a case in point, though ASM only contributed 9% of total gold production in Ghana in the year 2000, it contributed as much as 23% to total gold production in 2010, a mere ten years later (Norgah, 2013).

While the officially-reported proceeds from galamsey may be recent, the practice itself is rather ancient. Some records indicate that as early as the 4th century, gold was being mined on the small scale by indigenes in Ghana, serving as a material for trade with the Europeans and the Arabs. In the simplest of terms, this small-scale mining of gold involves teasing gold from the earth by washing it out of the soils and gravels where it is found (Norgah, 2013). Thus, gold is extracted from the alluvial deposits along rivers, waterways and terrestrial soils (Donkor, Nartey, Bonzongo, & Adotey, 2006). It is then processed and extracted by several procedures involving the use of mercury to form a gold-amalgam from which pure gold is obtained (Donkor et al., 2006).

Needless to say, galamsey is not without its repercussions especially considering the procedures used, and these transcend the economic results, which are significant in themselves since mining accounts for about forty percent of the nation's foreign export revenue. Additionally, however, are the social, health and environmental ramifications,

which are also substantial and prompt a more proactive response to the issue than is currently exhibited by national stakeholders.

However, there is still a fierce debate about whether small-scale mining is as dangerous as it is portrayed to be since it began to be regulated by the Ghanaian government through a series of legislations and some social marketing interventions concerning the polluting effect of galamsey on the River Pra in the country.

The PDA team had the opportunity to discuss the issue with Mr. Tony Dogbe, an experienced researcher and consultant with over 30 years of experience as a development practitioner, who incidentally, has taken part in ASM before. We discuss the motivations for galamsey and why it is illegal without a license, the effects it has on Ghanaian society, the role of various institutions, and the way forward for the country on this particular issue.

The Interview

PDA: Can you briefly explain the phenomenon of galamsey to those who may not be fully conversant with it?

TD: Galamsey comes from the English “gather and sell”, and it refers to alluvial mining where people mine gold from the water or soil using rudimentary tools like a pan and a wooden structure to sift the gold from mud. I actually engaged in it during the 1982-83 period when Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings closed down the universities not long after his coup d'état. After carrying cocoa as part of the task force, I joined miners at the riverside in Awodua, a gold-mining area near Tarkwa, in search of some adventure. So, it's something that has been going on for many years. In Ghana, mining and the sale of gold is not new at all. It was one of the basis for trade with the Arabs and Europeans who first came to the country.

What has made it new in a sense, is the attachment of the term ‘illegal’, which came about because in order to conduct mining now, one needs a license from the government, thus rendering unlicensed people illegal miners. What has also made it worse and such a big issue in recent conversations is the effect of galamsey on the environment, especially on the water bodies. The entry of foreigners, especially the Chinese, who came with heavy equipment like diggers that cause more damage more quickly, is another factor that has exacerbated the situation.

PDA: You mentioned adventure as a motivating force for you to do galamsey. What do you think are some other reasons that people engage in the practice?

TD: Currently, one of the big reasons I see is that there are no formal jobs for people, especially the youth. Agriculture hasn't been lucrative in a long while, and in order to make any meaningful returns, you'll need a lot of capital investment for fertilizer, pesticides, machines, etc. The youth don't usually have that kind of money for it. But in places where there are gold deposits, the capital necessary to start galamsey is very minimal; it's relatively easy for them to start. The buyers are also there and ready for it, so it looks like a viable

option to a struggling unemployed person. We also can't forget that the entry of foreigners into the game makes the damage much more visible, making it look like there are more people involved in galamsey, when there actually may not be as many as it seems.

PDA: *The damage being caused is one of the reasons there is such a hullabaloo about illegal mining practices. Can you share some of these effects with us?*

TD: Often, in order to get the gold, even if it is surface mining, one has to scrape off the topsoil which is usually the most fertile for agriculture in order to reach the soil with gold deposits. This means that land that could be used for agriculture is now being rendered useless. If galamsey was being properly controlled, and traditional leaders ensured that the land was reclaimed after mining activities, we could rest assured that land could still be used to support certain crops at least after mining activities, but this is not the case.

Again, after scraping off the topsoil to get what they want, galamsey people leave dugouts -- huge, gaping holes -- on the land surface, which is very dangerous for animals, children, and even adults who may not be paying attention to where they are going. Thirdly, the environmental damage cannot be denied. When galamsey is done in the forest, a lot of trees are cleared in order to access the soil. Additionally, the water bodies are affected because the rivers have a natural course that they follow, joining other tributaries and flowing down to the sea. Communities depend on these rivers for drinking water and other economic activities. Even the Ghana Water and Sewage Company uses these rivers to provide water for many other communities beyond the immediate surroundings of the river. Illegal miners usually don't consider all these factors when they are doing galamsey, and they end up sometimes diverting the course of the rivers in order to access the riverbed, creating artificial shortages of water in several small towns and communities.

Finally, galamsey seriously pollutes water bodies. The use of mercury in extracting the gold from the alluvial soil actually poisons the soil and the water, and this has serious repercussions because more resources and chemicals must then go into treating water for human consumption. For communities downstream who drink directly from these rivers, or use the water to water their plants and feed their animals, mercury poisoning is therefore a matter of course.

So you can see that unregulated or illegal mining is really a matter of concern that needs to be dealt with.

PDA: *Considering these serious effects, what do you think is the role of institutions like the Lands Commission, the EPA, and the local chieftaincy system? How can they contribute to improving the situation?*

TD: The state institutions you have mentioned, as well as some others like the Minerals Commission and the Forestry Commission, all have a role to play in terms of formulating policies and regulations to control the phenomenon. But the reality is that many of these institutions are not given the appropriate resources to monitor activities in the communities where galamsey is most serious. Also, because of the endemic corruption in the country over the years, it is also possible that some of these institutions are actually in league with some of the illegal miners. So, while the organizations can and do play a role, they are quite limited in their capacities to monitor even those they provide licenses and concessions to; they are also limited in terms of their offices and presence on the ground.

This is why, for me, the local government system and the traditional authorities can be made to play an increasingly major role in curbing illegal galamsey, especially the traditional authorities. They are the custodians of the land, holding it in trust for the ancestors, the living, and those yet unborn. Their role can therefore not be overemphasized, but it is evident that they have not been empowered with the mandate and the authority to play the roles they need to. Ghanaian law stipulates that the president is the custodian of all the land in the country, instead of the chiefs who traditionally possess this authority.

So, a gap has been created between the two authorities which makes it more difficult to effectively control the activities on the land. What is currently happening is that the local leaders are sitting there, and someone walks in and says, "I have a concession or license to mine in this whole area." And the chiefs can do nothing about it. The compensation even given to the farmers who were working in that place is very poor, but because they've usually never seen that much money before, they jump at the opportunity. For me, these are some of the ground-level challenges that we need to battle.

PDA: *So how do you propose that Ghana deal with the issue in coming years?*

TD: The area of Chanaian law which deals with mining really needs to be looked at again, making space for co-management by the chiefs, communities, and the various state institutions in order to more properly manage mining lands. This way, all the stakeholders will have joint responsibility for the area and work towards preventing the worst damage from illegal mining.

At the district level, District Assemblies can work hand in hand with communities and their leaders to determine land use planning, identifying which land potentially has gold, which can be used for animal rearing, which land is good for agriculture, etc. Usually, the communities are in a better position to tell because these things are passed on from generation to generation. But the government can also come in by using all kinds of tools and tests to more precisely ascertain what the best use of any particular plot of land could be.

All this also contributes to why some of us are very passionate about real decentralization in the country, making funds available to the districts which they can use to carry out their duties. Without resources, they are doomed. We need a decentralization that helps citizens to understand what they benefit from it, and therefore makes them more willing to engage with it.

Going forward, we also need to control and flush out the involvement of foreigners. When we talk about foreigners in this case, I am referring to foreigners involved in illegal mining, obviously, not the properly licensed ones like Anglogold Ashanti and Newmont Ghana, who have been involved in mining in Ghana over the years. It seems that our government has spoken a lot about doing this, but has been unable to really get on top of the situation. If people want to engage in mining, then the sector must be properly regulated, with responsibility lying on both the traditional leaders and the state institutions to protect all stakeholders.

In the long term, however, we must provide lucrative jobs for the youth, especially those in gold-rich communities, in order to lessen the attraction to engage in galamsey activities.

PDA: Thank you so much for your insights on this issue. As always, you have been very helpful and we hope that your wise ideas will encourage some more proactive decisions in dealing with illegal mining practices in the country.

Profile of Tony Dogbe

Tony is a social development practitioner with nearly 35 years' experience. He is a co-founder of Participatory Development Associates Ltd and PDA Agro-Industries and Social Enterprise (PASE) Ltd. He believes that development is sustainable when it is owned and driven by the people who are to benefit from it and when everyone has a part to play.

References

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