

Small-Scale Mining and Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Ghana's Experience

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Most small-scale mining activities concentrate in the southwestern rain forests of Ghana following the Birimian and Tarkwaian systems. Small-scale mining provides alternative livelihoods for disaffected villagers who argue that the multinational mining corporations operating in the area have ravaged their farmlands with little or no compensation in return. Having lost their farmlands to mining activities of the multinationals and left with no other option for livelihood, most people have turned to the age-old once banned small-scale mining practice for survival. Though the government has legalized small-scale mining in 1989, only few mining concessions have been granted to the local farmers forcing thousands to operate illicitly. Notwithstanding the legalization, tools for operation still remain rudimentary comprising basic hand tools as pickaxes, shovels, sluice boxes, dynamite or explosives, mercury and washing plants. Occasionally, Honda water pumps are used depending on the location and level of sophistication of the miners. This paper assesses the small-scale mining sector both as a sustainable alternative livelihood source and as a poverty reduction strategy. The paper argues that government initiatives to support small-scale mining industry have failed to transform production techniques of the sector to ensure sustainability of its operations. Analysis indicates that failure of efforts to transform the industry technologically is largely attributable to institutional dysfunction and bureaucratic lapses rendering it hazardous. Making small-scale mining a viable sustainable livelihood other than just a survival strategy, there is need to improve the industry's production technology to enhance productivity and yields. Strengthening the mining institutions that act as pillars of the Small-Scale Mining Project is also critical to removing operational constraints that limit the productivity and competitiveness of the industry. Though the mercury amalgamation technique is cheap and dependable in operations for concentrating and extracting gold, levels of its health hazard require further investigation to make it worthwhile.