

Digging Into The Past: Rwanda's Pursuit for a Domestic Mineral Economy

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In the Great Lakes Region (GLR), Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are undergoing significant mineral policy transformations. In Rwanda, its new policy is described by its Ministry of Natural Resources (MINIRENA) as one of transition: from nationalisation to privatisation, and from a regional trading hub for mineral exports to a domestic extractive player (Ministry of Natural Resource, *Revised Mining Policy 2009*). These reforms are considered in their broadest sense efforts to *formalise* its historical small-scale mining sector by strengthening small-scale operations and improving trade regulation through international certification and traceability schemes. Whereas Rwanda's policy transformation seeks to increase its domestic mineral production capacities and thus national revenues, its transformation has predominantly been interpreted as driven by regional political and security imperatives to tighten control of the illicit flow of minerals from its neighboring countries, mainly eastern DRC. This driver, and its specific implementation policies, has largely eclipsed an equally important debate on Rwanda's domestic mining capacity: what are the dynamics of its industry, and what might be the steps necessary to further harness its potential? How do then regional certification and traceability schemes fit into this domestic framework?

This paper positions current reforms within a historical examination of Rwanda's mining sector. It argues that, contrary to the current research focus on Rwanda's role in illicit mineral trade, the country has had, and continues to have, a small but vibrant domestic mining sector that may be providing vital lessons on how small-scale mining can not only increase mineral development but equally contribute to rural poverty alleviation. Yet as with other small-scale mining industries in sub-Saharan Africa, significant obstacles remain before its potential may be truly harnessed. The paper raises the following questions for further research by capitalizing on evidence from secondary data and key informant interviews in Rwanda: 1) Why, despite the myriad of attempts to develop a national producing economy, has Rwanda largely failed to mobilise a significant mineral industry? 2) What are the historical dynamics concerning cross-border flows of artisanal mining production in the country? 3) What have been the attempts by successive Rwandan regimes to curb this informal trade? and 4) Why have these attempts largely not succeeded to date? Against this backdrop, the paper concludes with some preliminary reflections on the importance of historical research for current policy debates on mineral transformation in Rwanda, and more generally in sub-Saharan Africa. It furthermore reflects on the role of small-scale mining in the region, and the steps necessary to ensure its advancement within national development policies.