Dialogue 2:
Africa’s Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining Amidst COVID-19.
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Introduction

The IANRA and SARW jointly hosted an African-wide webinar on Africa’s artisanal and small-scale mining amidst COVID-19, forming part of the efforts contributing to sustainable solution formulation to the long-standing challenges of ASM in Africa. There was a total of 30 participants in the webinar representative of five African countries; South Africa, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and Zambia. The panelists included Nyaradzo Mutonhori from the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association in Zimbabwe; Berns Komba Lebbie from the Network Movement for Justice and Development organisation in Sierra Leone; Yves Bawa, the Country Director at PACT in the Democratic Republic of Congo; Amani Mustafa Mhinda from the Open Society for East Africa in Tanzania; Felix Ngosa from Norwegian Church Aid in Zambia and Prof. Nellie Mutemeri from the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa; facilitated by Nsamo Musonda from Care for Nature in Zambia.

Nyaradzo Mutonhori - Zimbabwe

Commencing the dialogue was Nyaradzo Mutonhori presenting on the current realities of artisanal small-scale mining in Zimbabwe. Mutonhori articulated that the ASM sector in Zimbabwe currently contributes to output across different value chains in the chrome, gemstones, and gold sectors amongst others. About 63% of the gold produced in 2019 was from the artisanal and small-scale mining sector, indicative of its size and significance in the country.

In the third quarter of 2019, the sector produced 2480 tons of gold, with a drastic reduction of approximately 1000 tons as only 1462 tons of gold were produced in 2020. This difference in production can be attributed to COVID-19 and some of the inherent challenges being faced by ASM miners in Zimbabwe.

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, African governments, Zimbabwe included, enacted strict lockdown regulations. Due to the strict travel regulations imposed, ASM miners were operating with skeletal staff, consequently leading to the reduction in production. Further, they were delayed payments by Fidelity Printers and Refineries who are the main gold-buyer in Zimbabwe. A chain reaction triggered by the dollar crisis innate in the country. This set-in motion a negative chain of operations in procurement and operations as it restricted their ability to hire machinery and equipment. Also, the limited working hours due to COVID-19 lockdown regulations largely impacted ASM miners who tend to operate 24 hours daily.

As a result, Mutonhori added that the negative effects of the pandemic had led to a rise in the levels of criminality in the ASM sector. There was a spike in parallel markets and illicit gold trade. The female miners were forced to relocate back to their residential homes as most of the mines were targeted...
by criminal elements, violence and rise of dangerous machete gangs. Worsening the effect of the pandemic, the Ministry of Mines in Zimbabwe has been slow in processing licenses, resulting in a number of the artisanal miners inadvertently operating illegally. All these factors contributed to the drastic decline in gold production.

In addition, due to the environmental degradation effect triggered by this sector, she reiterated the need for the immaculate implementation of practical solutions in this sector. These include finding alternatives to the use of Mercury for one and increasing environmental management practices to reduce future costs for the government. Further, to aid this agenda, Mutonhori predicted that the formalisation of ASM will potentially play a key role as it will foster environmental compliance.

It is widely understood that when carrying out development projects, perceptions matter as they affect agency. In Zimbabwe, there is a general perception that ASM is an alternative economic livelihood activity when in actuality, it is a widespread economic activity that is undertaken by different groups with a range of different educational levels and economic backgrounds and it is also a lucrative sector. Wrongly perceiving ASM as only a ‘side-hustle’ has negatively impacted the nature and agency of policy recommendations brought up in terms of formalising the sector. Concluding, Mutonhori elaborated that there is increasing need for civil society in Zimbabwe to advocate for an ASM mining license that is holistic in terms of support, a license that is financially inclusive, provides healthcare services and sexual reproductive health facilities on-site.

Berns Lebbie – Sierra Leone

The dialogue then advanced to the shores of West Africa in Sierra Leone. Lebbie articulated that in Sierra Leone, ‘artisanal mining’ and ‘small-scale mining’ do not mean the same thing. He added that according to the 2009 Mines and Minerals Act the two sectors were separate practices. The act defines artisanal mining as mining exclusively for Sierra Leoneans that cannot be conducted with the use of any machine where the miner cannot dig below 10 metres. The Act further defines small-scale mining as mining that can be practiced or carried out by a company/corporative or any kind of entity that must include more than 25% of Sierra Leoneans, permits the use of machinery that is not heavy and miners cannot dig below 20 metres.

Historically, diamonds were founded in Sierra Leone in 1930 through artisanal mining with the use of rudimentary tools, a practice that has been carried out till-date. Lebbie added that this very practice has created numerous jobs in mining communities across the country, however, there has not been any official data on the actual number of people who have benefitted from this practice due to the informal nature of the sector.

Diamond and gold are the key minerals mined through artisanal mining and the outbreak of COVID-19 impacted mineral production significantly. There has been a reduction in the demand for precious minerals resulting in a drop in their prices as seasonal international buyers could not access the country due to lock down-travel regulations. Moreover, people were also restricted from going
to the mines due to the prolonged inter-district travel bans and these affected the direct economic contributions and standards of living for those engaged in this sector.

Lebbie further added that the misperceptions on ASM operations have according to analysis, misinformed legislation that support the sector. To address this, Sierra Leone has been making frantic efforts to formalise the artisanal sector and has now come up with the Artisanal Mining Policy that was formulated in 2019. This policy aims to actualise the African mining vision alongside nation-state building. It consists of numerous recommendations that can benefit the artisanal miner, and accounts for the depletion of diamonds in artisanal mines. More-so, there needs to be increased support from large mines in order to make the ASM mines smart and sustainable.

In his conclusion, Lebbie provided a few recommendations and lessons for the future. Considering the informality of the sector, in order to make it sustainable, a link to large-scale mining needs to be created in order to eliminate the existing competition between the two sectors. Competition resulting from the gradual depletion of minerals the world is facing. Due to this, ASM cannot be made an ‘island’ of operations and separated from other forms of mining. It needs to be complementary to foster alliance and co-dependence between large and small-scale mines. It is critical for African countries to come together and come up with ideas on how to make ASM more attractive and meaningful to those who are engaged in it.

**Yves Bawa (Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC))**

The dialogue included the voice of the DRC, the mineral breadbasket of the continent but one also plagued with the ‘resource curse’. In his presentation, Bawa elaborated that the DRC formalised ASM only 14 years ago, at a time when the government felt it did not have the capacity to provide a sustainable livelihood to most of its communities. ASM was therefore the tool the government used to bridge this service delivery gap.

Approximately 30% of cobalt and 100% of tin production in the DRC comes from ASM with the country producing approximately 60% of Cobalt globally. This according to Bawa, speaks to the growth of the sector over the years as it has now become a global centre for raw materials needed to make today’s gadgets and machinery in this technological era.

With growing interests and research into ASM, many questions have arisen querying the actual, quantifiable contributions of the sector. However, Bawa informed that when referring to the ‘contribution’ that ASM has made, stakeholders and actors tend to only refer to the national tax contribution and have a tendency to leave out other important aspects. These include all the small payments from the mines to the export points, different stakeholders involved directly and indirectly and revenue from ASM that comes in the form of formal or informal payments. Therefore, there is need for tracking such payments when attempting to understand the right contribution of ASM. Moreover, the misconception of ASM as a ‘get-rich-quick’ activity neglects the sustainable potential of the sector because there is not enough data on it. Diamonds and gold remain problematic
when collecting data on ASM in the DRC with large delivery discrepancies. A problem that Bawa illustrated, can only be solved by the national government collecting statistics at local, national and international market levels.

There are many strides yet to be taken towards formalisation and legislation in this sector. It is therefore pivotal for African nations and their leaders to avoid seeing ASM as a second-hand activity but as a real business, where actors and miners are incorporated into its structures with legal frameworks of a business.

Bawa noted that 2020 has not been a smooth sail for the ASM sector. The COVID-19 travel bans negatively affected ASM efficiency. The production of tin has decreased by approximately 50%. Access to finance reduced as the banks reduced the amount of money meant to be allocated to the sector and as such, there has been less financial fluidity. Further, all initiatives focused on the formalisation and litigation of ASM were delayed because there was restricted movement and officials could not go on site to assess ASM activities. Lastly, he explained that due to COVID-19, there was a spike in child labour and criminal activity. Small-scale mining produces 90% of the workforce and COVID-19 proved that the ASM community needs to adapt itself and find other avenues of doing business amidst the pandemic, keeping in mind that it is a livelihood activity for thousands of people.

Amani Mhinda – Tanzania

In Tanzania, there are approximately 1 500 000 people directly involved in small-scale mining and 2 million people indirectly involved in other activities along that value chain. ASM has been largely regarded as a productive activity in the country due to its labour-intensive nature that continues to create job opportunities for the rural population where they could not access opportunities through formal processes.

Different African countries have had relatively varying experiences with ASM due to their historical differences, nation-state agenda and spiritual priorities. Tanzania proved this in its unorthodox response to COVID-19. Mhinda illustrated that the country did not follow the normal stringent lockdown rules as most countries due of its spiritual faith and traditional approach to the virus. This strategy, according to Mhinda, somewhat cushioned the country from the prolonged effects of the pandemic in the ASM sector.

However, it too was not immune to the adverse effects of the pandemic. Mhinda explained that biggest challenge the country has faced since the onset of COVID-19 is solely that small-scale mining, just like large scale mining, is based on a neoliberal economic model that is export-oriented and depends on market demands and trends. Further, the closure of borders and heightened legal and health conditionalities have therefore created a liquidity problem within the mining community as the sector is dependent on exports with little domestic consumption capacity. Household income and livelihood was also drastically reduced as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, COVID-19 created infrastructural challenges particularly in the healthcare sector where the government
channelled funds to building centres for treatment and containment – leaving very little focus on ASM. This sector also experiences many challenges related to occupational health but interventions towards this cause were curbed to the emergent focus on the pandemic.

Mhinda then added that ‘formalisation’ as a solution to ASM trajectories would be like plastering a bandage to a wound, if not carried out correctly and with all actors considered. Thus far the process of formalising ASM has been wrongly focused on legalisation. It assumes that only people having mining licenses are the formal miners.

In actuality, the majority a of ASM activities in Tanzania are being carried out by artisans who do so as a form of entrepreneurship, infringing on their entrepreneurship potential. Most people involved in ASM do so as a means to provide for their families and not entirely as a get-rich-quick scheme. However, with the decrease in exports, it is important to note that women incurred the most losses and suffrage in the sector. Women in the sector their jobs and had to find a balance between child-care, economic survival and ASM productivity.

According to Mhinda, in order to adequately support the ASM sector, there needs to be an increase the research and innovation activities done to bridge the gap of knowledge building within the sector. Localised research programmes need to be created in an attempt to build on national sovereignty and the legitimacy. The framework under which ASM is handled needs to be transformed as it does not give the miners a voice and it still does not regard ASM as a sustainable way of creating opportunities for livelihood advancement. An alternative to the neoliberal framework of operations to one that is supportive to ASM needs to be adopted to promote inclusivity. Lastly, more dialogue platforms including both practitioners and ASM miners should be created as a bottom-up reach in the path to development.

Felix Ngosa - Zambia

“Every time a Zambian wants to mine, we call them an illegal miner, but they are allowed to farm on the land at will” – this has been the biased reality of the Zambian economy. There is relatively little knowledge and data about artisanal mining in the country. Over the years, there have been many dialogues on precious minerals that have some-what increased the government’s engagement in the subject matter, giving it more momentum. The current gold-rush in many parts of the country due to the discovery of new gold-deposits has worked in the favour of ASM. More people are engaging and opening up to the sector as a form of livelihood. Although, the development agenda of Zambia has been largely focused on large scale mining - Copper mining and precious stones, with growing interests in Magnesium.

In the dialogue, Ngosa further added that the contribution of ASM to the economy of Zambia had over the years been a point of contention, duly because of the government’s neglect of the sector. It is only through the sector’s attempts at formalisation that the government is now taking interest. However, there are still a lot of mining activities carried out unregulated in the country.
Adding to the sector’s problems has been the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic globally. For precious minerals such as gold, demand has reduced due to the pandemic. A reality attributable to Zambia’s minerals market that mostly consists of international buyers such as the Chinese, who have been unable to travel and engage in trade at the Emeralds centre or even illegally explained Ngosa.

In Zambia ASM has grown in popularity and significance because it is an added productive activity alongside agriculture. Not only that, ASM provides start-up capital for the businesses of local farmers and it also provides supplementary income for locals. Most use these proceeds from mining to re-invest in agriculture and grow their financial coffers. However, ASM in Zambia has its fair share of challenges. These include occupational health issues at the mines, child labour, women abuse and environmental degradation.

Ngosa acknowledged that the formalisation of the ASM sector might be a viable solution to most of its problems. Policy-based initiatives need to be created to foster the mobilisation of ASM miners and legitimize the practice. In addition, policies and laws need to be created to cushion these operators to improve their marketability and access to financing. Lastly, grassroots advocacy programs for the government to create specific initiatives and regulations that will treat ASM miners as separate entities from the large-scale mining sector need to be implemented.

In order to create a brighter, more predictable future, every nation in the African continent needs to strive towards self-sustainability. Empowering, mobilising and funding artisanal small-scale miners is one way of achieving this goal.

**Prof. Nellie Mutemeri – South Africa**

In South Africa, the rainbow nation of Africa, the ASM sector is relatively smaller than in other African countries illustrated Prof. Mutemeri. This being due to its Apartheid history where mining activities were exclusive and almost forbidden to the Black population and poor people who tend to get involved in the sector. This reality changed post-democratic independence as now, the number of people entering the sector has increased. Similar to other countries, illegality-informality is very high and in South Africa There is a large contingent over undocumented migrants that are active in the sector.

Due of this, one of the unique impacts of COVID-19 was the untold suffering of these undocumented migrants who get into informal mining because it has lower barriers of entry when it comes to income generation. Because they are not recognised in any formal structures, the illegal immigrants could not receive any social support from the government.

However, Prof. Mutemeri added that there has been a prominent silver-lining about COVID-19 in South Africa. It has led to the creation of more democratised and increasingly inclusive spaces of engagement as the world became virtual. The new virtual nature of these rooms has cut costs for hosts allowing for more participants and voices to be heard all over the world. Also, as a response
to the pandemic, the South African government is now putting in place an ASM policy to foster inclusivity in the sector to increase stakeholder participation.

ASM is not a money scheme and should not be seen as such. Beginners need a lot of financial support for many weeks to buy diesel, food and medication which might not pay off in the end - people do it to improve their livelihood.

A lot of the legislation in Africa is focused on the downscaling of what existed in the formal sector into ASM, there is no single aspect that can affect legislation. This is why formalisation needs to be critically applied.

To cushion the realities of ASM in the African continent, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can lend in understanding that ASM needs to be included in all debates and that it can be sustainable. They can work with government to put in place things that will persuade the government into putting transformative programmes that will translate into action. A high degree of formalisation is also a cause CSOs should support as governments should have plans for ASM regulation, economic viability, internalising economic and social impact and responsible supply chains. They can also assist government and other stakeholders by putting place policy and regulatory frameworks that can provide for formalisation to create positive development outcomes and sustainability. Data collection is one of the biggest challenges in the ASM sector because of its informality. If there was accurate and accessible data about gold production and gold delivery, different stakeholders would make better, more informed decisions about policy and interventions. CSOs can play a major role in bridging this gap. Lastly, CSOs need to support the building of the voices of ASM miners and help them fully participate in the processes of policy and legal frameworks, and the country-mining-vision.

Conclusion

ASM in Africa has been experienced at varying intensities and characteristics across Africa but all have been equally affected by the insurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic and many other inherent problems in the sector. It was argued that due to its informal nature, its overall contribution to particular countries and to the practitioners can not be quantifiable, a major snag for policymaking and development planning. Moreover, the pandemic has also exposed the vulnerabilities and gaps within the sector. The issues arising due to covid-19 include; an alarming rise in criminal activities, violence in the sector (machete gangs in Zimbabwe), reduced mineral production, loss of income for the sector and trade, loss of income for the miners and therefore a drastically reduced standard of living. The formalisation of this sector was nuanced as a productive and more sustainable solution. However, some panellists argued that the pre-conditions for this process need to re-set and be more inclusive, incorporating all actors involved. Lastly, it was agreed that there is still more that the arm of civil society can do to improve the functionality of ASM. Civil society organisations can be the key players in championing policy initiatives and development projects in the sector, and they can efficiently build the bridge between government and the miners.