Child Labour in African Artisanal Mining Communities: Experiences from Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The issue of child labour in the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) economy is attracting significant attention worldwide. This article critically examines this 'problem' in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where a lack of formal sector employment opportunities and/or the need to provide financial support to their impoverished families has led tens of thousands of children to take up work in this industry. The article begins by engaging with the main debates on child labour in an attempt to explain why young boys and girls elect to pursue arduous work in ASM camps across the region. The remainder of the article uses the Ghana experience to further articulate the challenges associated with eradicating child labour at ASM camps, drawing upon recent fieldwork undertaken in Talensi-Nabdam District, Upper East Region. Overall, the issue of child labour in African ASM communities has been diagnosed far too superficially, and until donor agencies and host governments fully come to grips with the underlying causes of the poverty responsible for its existence, it will continue to burgeon.

INTRODUCTION

On 10 June 2005, the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) World Day Against Child Labour 2005 took place in Geneva. The aim of the event, ‘A Load Too Heavy’, was to raise awareness of the child labour ‘problem’ in the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) industry.\(^1\) Tripartite delegations from fifteen countries that had previously signed accords committing themselves to eliminating child labour in ASM and quarrying in a ‘time bound’

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1. Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) comprises all low-tech, labour-intensive mineral excavation and processing activities prevalent in developing countries. In this article, ‘small-scale mining’ and ‘artisanal mining’ are used interchangeably.

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\(^2\) International Institute of Social Studies

\(^3\) Development and Change
manner were in attendance. The ILO’s rationale for the event was made clear beforehand: that employing young children at small-scale mines and quarries is unacceptable, and is considered a ‘worst form of child labour’ because of the extent and severity of the industry’s hazards (ILO, 2004).

In Geneva, there was significant representation from sub-Saharan Africa, where ASM is in a deplorable state. The region’s ASM camps have high concentrations of HIV/AIDS, are a source of significant environmental pollution, and generally lack the requisite mechanization to raise participants’ living standards beyond a subsistence level (Hentchel et al., 2002; Hinton et al., 2003; ILO, 1999). The message now resonating in policy-making circles is that ASM is a ‘poverty-driven activity’, pursued by a range of different actors who have few alternative employment prospects: redundant public sector workers, nomads, subsistence farmers and a host of semi-skilled people (Banchirigah, 2006; Hilson and Potter, 2005; Maconachie and Binns, 2007). It is often argued that the scores of young boys and girls now found engaged in a range of arduous activities at ASM camps, including heavy lifting, digging, ore haulage and transport, are products of this poverty. In recent years, policy makers and donors have drawn attention to the particularly serious situation in sub-Saharan Africa, where ASM communities, with their low barriers to entry, are expanding rapidly (see Barry, 1996; MMSD, 2002).

Since publishing its report, ‘Social and Labour Issues in Small-Scale Mines’ (ILO, 1999), the ILO has worked diligently to inform wider audiences about the child labour ‘problem’ prevalent in so many ASM communities across sub-Saharan Africa. Its officers have attempted to mobilize support for their campaign by arguing that elimination of child labour is ‘an achievable goal’ because the estimated proportion of child labourers in the sector worldwide is only one million; arguing vociferously — though at times unconvincingly — that in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, governments are committed to addressing the issue; and suggesting that there is an extensive lobby for change among child miners and their parents (ILO, 2004). The scores of brochures, reports and web documents the organization has since produced on the topic, however, fail to identify the drivers of children’s participation in ASM-related work and possible ways forward. The wider academic literature also offers minimal guidance on this front. Most scholarly analysis of ASM draws attention to the industry’s environmental concerns and regulatory challenges.

This article helps to bridge these gaps by providing an extended analysis of the dynamics of child labour in ASM camps in Talensi-Nabdam District, Northern Ghana. A main argument espoused in the wider literature is that the

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2. The ILO’s Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour is known as the ‘Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention’. It was adopted as ILO Convention No. 182. Ratification commits a country to eliminating the worst forms of child labour.
Child Labour in Artisanal Mining Communities (Northern Ghana)

Principal cause of child labour in sub-Saharan Africa is poverty: that young boys and girls engage in arduous work, particularly in rural areas, in order to help support their families, and are in many cases the principal income earners (Bass, 2004; Kielland and Tovo, 2006). There is also the — albeit somewhat contested — position that in rural sub-Saharan Africa, increased education is a key to eradicating child labour (see, for example, Admassie, 2002; Ray, 2002). Officers at the ILO and many African governments also believe that child labour in the ASM sector is linked to poverty, and that increased educational support is capable of discouraging many young boys and girls from engaging in mine-related work. In Ghana, this policy position triggered the launch of Operation Sunlight, a project that aims ‘to make a significant contribution to the elimination of child labour in the...gold mines of northern Ghana’ (Afrikids, 2007: 3) by reintegrating the youth into educational and vocational training programmes. The project was commissioned by the ILO and undertaken by Afrikids, a Ghanaian NGO.

After critically examining the child labour issue in Africa’s ASM sector, the rest of this article uses the case of Talensi-Nabdam to underscore the challenges involved in addressing it, drawing upon findings from recent interviews conducted with children and parents over a two-year period. Throughout the district, many children engage in mining in order to earn income to pay for school fees and in the process, escape poverty.

Child Labour in African Small-Scale Mining Communities: A Critical Overview

The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes exploitative and ‘unacceptable’ work in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa makes identifying cases of child labour in its ASM camps a challenging task. Sub-Saharan Africa has long been recognized as having the globe’s highest concentration of child labour. Here, one in every three children between the ages of five and fourteen is economically active (Bass, 2004). In contrast to Asia, however, where child labour is essentially an urban ‘problem’, in sub-Saharan Africa, it is most prevalent in rural areas, where over 70 per cent of the population resides. Some 90 per cent of this work is tied to agriculture, which creates employment opportunities that require moderate skills and limited supervision, ideally suited for young boys and girls (Admassie, 2002; Bass, 2006; Kielland and Tovo, 2006).

Here is where confusion can arise: whilst several governments in sub-Saharan Africa have ratified the ILO’s Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), culturally, the idea of children ‘going to farm’ is generally acceptable because it has long been a part of daily life in many of the region’s rural societies (see Kielland and Tovo, 2006). According to the Convention, ‘light work’ is permissible for children aged thirteen to fifteen ‘as long
as it does not threaten their health and safety, or hinder their education or vocational orientation and training’. But often, the context in which children’s work takes place in rural sub-Saharan Africa — environments lacking in transportation and machinery — makes life extremely labour-intensive, potentially making a situation appear worse than it is. Specifically, activities that ‘take little or no time in an urban setting — like getting a glass of water — become extremely time consuming where basic infrastructure and services are missing’ (Kielland and Tovo, 2006: 25). In an attempt to strengthen existing labour codes, the ILO implemented Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999). As noted at the outset, ASM has been identified as an industry that harbours some of the ‘worst forms of child labour’ and for this reason, garnered the international spotlight in June 2005 as the featured theme of the organization’s World Day Against Child Labour 2005.

Poverty is a principal cause of child labour in many rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa. The poverty hypothesis explains child labour as an unavoidable effect of hardship, and posits that the participation of children in the workforce contributes positively to household income, alleviates economic stress, and meets the consumption requirements of the family (Togunde and Carter, 2006). With more than 50 per cent of the region’s population living below the poverty line, and its countries ranking consistently amongst the poorest in the world, the argument posed is that poverty is driving children ‘[to] work to provide income to support themselves and possible other family members’, and that as it ‘deepens, more and more children at younger and younger ages have been engaging in paid economic activities’ (Hope, 2005: 23). In rural sub-Saharan Africa, more often than not, these ‘economic activities’ are linked to subsistence farming (Kielland and Tovo, 2006: 25).

Despite becoming an issue of considerable debate in policy-making circles, the issue of child labour in ASM — at least in the context of sub-Saharan Africa — has failed to attract significant academic investigation. The small body of literature produced on the topic to date (such as Groves, 2004; Jennings, 1999) does describe the situation on the ground, but fails to answer important questions such as why children pursue work in this sector and how they can be discouraged from doing so. A dearth of analysis has likely led to educated guesses about why child labour is so widespread in the region’s ASM camps, as well as the type of mine work young boys and girls undertake. The analysis presented in this article will help bridge these gaps.

Although links have not yet been firmly established, based on what has been reported in the literature, in line with the poverty hypothesis, it appears that family hardship is indeed driving young children to work in many ASM camps across sub-Saharan Africa. Most policy makers and donors subscribe to the idea that the sector’s recent rapid growth in the region is linked to hardship, which has earned it the label ‘poverty-driven activity’ (see, for example, Barry, 1996). But there appears to be a poor understanding of where children fit into this equation. With boys and girls having little autonomy
in many rural African societies and since, as ‘most research show[s] . . . the
tasks performed by young children, in particular, tend to be typical women’s
tasks — carrying, subsistence agriculture, and housework’ (Kielland and
Tovo, 2006: 25), for many parents, the idea of children working at ASM
sites is probably no less trivial than their sons and daughters labouring on
farms.

The recent attention paid by donors and policy makers to child labour
in ASM worldwide is likely a result of it becoming more ‘visible’ due to
the sector’s recent rapid expansion. In sub-Saharan Africa, this growth is
linked to patterns of ‘de-agrarianization’: the ‘branching out’ of farmers into
non-farm activities such as ASM (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010; Bryceson
and Jonsson, 2010) in response to smallholder agriculture becoming a less
profitable enterprise in a liberalized market.³ Such has been the case in
Zimbabwe, where proceeds from gold sales are used by numerous reset-
talled farmers to purchase crucial agricultural inputs (Maponga and Ngorima,
2003). Similarly, in the Niassa and Manica townships of Mozambique, an
estimated 30 per cent of miners now engage in ASM to ‘complement earning
from agriculture, which is mainly practiced in the rainy season’ (Mondlane
and Shoko, 2003: 267). Whilst the ‘de-agrarianization’ and rural livelihood
diversification literature (see, for example, Barrett et al., 2001; Bryceson,
1996; Ellis, 2006) pays minimal attention to child labour, the very adults
who work alongside their children on farms are likely to be doing the same
at mine sites. In much the same way that asking young boys and girls to
undertake chores on family farms is necessary for family survival, mine
work could also be seen as a family activity. The fact that numerous young
girls and boys now found working at ASM camps across rural sub-Saharan
Africa are engaged in activities similar to those carried out on smallholder
farms — loading, carrying water, hauling and preparing meals — suggests
that child labour in this context has cultural dimensions.

This appears to be the case in Talensi-Nabdam District, where as Bass
(2004: 20) explains, ‘the Talensi people of northern Ghana share a small-
scale farming society that maintains organization through a system of patri-
lineal clans and lineages’, and is an illustrative example of how ‘in many
rural African societies, children’s training and education are by-products of
their work’. With many Talensi families now balancing farm labour with
mine work, it could be a case of the latter taking on an organizational struc-
ture similar to that of the former. Thus, what is often portrayed as a growing
child labour ‘problem’ in the sector could, in cases such as Talensi-Nabdam,
simply be a product of ‘de-agrarianization’ or livelihood diversification,
where cultural practices, including ‘children at work’, are carried from one
activity (farming) to another (mining).

³ In a liberalized agricultural market, crucial farm inputs such as fertilizers are no longer
subsidized; state support services for smallholders have ceased; and currencies have been
devalued, which has led to farmers receiving fewer ‘real dollars’ for their product.
Given that so little is known about the dynamics of child labour in the ASM sector, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is placing it in the category of ‘the worst forms of child labour’ appropriate? Officers at the ILO have argued that children carry out a range of hazardous activities in the region’s artisanal mine sites, including handling toxic mercury to amalgamate gold, descending into mine shafts and carrying heavy loads (ILO, 2004). There have also been reports of children being exploited outright, a case in point being Tanzania’s ‘snake boys’, who are employed to crawl into narrow mine pits and shafts. Are these cases, however, isolated incidents or widespread? In the past, policy makers, donors and NGOs have shown a bias in their assessments of child labour in rural sub-Saharan Africa, heavily influenced by images of young boys and girls at work, at the same time overlooking how rural life in the region is a daily struggle for survival:

The endlessly repeated scenes of women and children pounding yams or cassava, piling seeds, and drying foods, strike most foreigners who travel through the African countryside... [as does] the endless rows of women and children carrying wood, water, and agricultural products to their homes or the nearest market, often on a several-hour walk away, and often in very high temperatures. (Kielland and Tovo, 2006: 26)

In Talensi-Nabdam’s small-scale gold mining communities, buyers and the occasional ‘pit owner’ amalgamate gold, and there are generally strict rules imposed on children working in pits. Here, the work being carried out by most young girls and boys is generally confined to menial tasks, similar to work carried out on the district’s family farms.

It is widely believed that education is the best ‘antidote’ to child labour in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly its rural areas (see, for example, Nieuwenhuys, 1996). Demand for child labour is also frequently identified as the primary factor behind the low school attendance in the Upper East Region, although it is unclear whether there is a direct trade-off between schooling and work (Gage, 2005). Boas and Hatloy (2008), for example, concluded from surveys of street children in Accra (Ghana) and Bamako (Mali), youth in Kono district (Sierra Leone), and war-affected children in Voinja district (Liberia), that child labour is a consequence of poverty and steep school fees. Similarly, Lockhead et al. (1989) found that in Malawi, children’s work on the farm impaired their educational achievement. Conversely, Fuller et al. (1995) found no such relationship between household labour and girls’ probability of leaving school in Botswana.

The work being undertaken in this area by the ILO and allied UN agencies is premised upon the idea that ‘the main reason why children start work instead of attending school, or leave school before completing their primary education, is that their families are poor and cannot pay the basic costs of food and housing without their child earning something as well’ (UNICEF,
In the case of ASM, the impression being conveyed by these organizations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is that a lack of educational opportunities is also driving children to the sector’s camps in search of work. This message is made clear in the ILO report, ‘Eliminating Child Labour in Mining and Quarrying’ (ILO, 2005: 17), which states: ‘no or difficult access to good and adequate education, especially secondary education, is also common and children with no access to education have little alternative but to enter the labour market’. Many of the ILO’s own studies have drawn conclusions which reinforce this claim. For example, almost 70 per cent of child labourers interviewed as part of an ILO study carried out in mining camps in the Chunya, Geita and Tunduru districts of Tanzania reported that they were forced to stop their studies because they lacked the finances to attend school (Mwami et al., 2002). Similarly, another ILO study carried out in Burkinabe ASM communities reported that several child labourers had dropped out of school because of a lack of funds (Groves, 2004). There has been a steady stream of complementary policy implemented in this area, most of which is premised upon similar ideas. Since implementation of Convention No. 182, the blueprint for the ILO’s Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), the central goal of which, again, is the ‘progressive elimination of child labour’ (Manzo, 2005: 395), ASM has received growing attention in many mainstream child labour programmes (see Table 1).

Findings from the few independent studies that have been carried out on child labour in ASM camps across sub-Saharan Africa, however, indicate that the situation is far more complex than the ILO’s diagnosis: that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country Country Programme (has mining components)</th>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>Total Project Budget (US$)</th>
<th>Budget for Action Programme or component on mining (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uganda Country Programme</td>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>1,196,260</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zambia Country Programme</td>
<td>Stone, gold</td>
<td>630,510</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger Country Programme</td>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>400,250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzania: Action Programme as part of Country Programme</td>
<td>Gold, gemstones, diamonds</td>
<td>24,230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madagascar: Action Programme as Part of Country Programme</td>
<td>Gemstones, stone</td>
<td>10,240</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya: Action Programme as Part of Country Programme</td>
<td>Gemstones, stone</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the sector is not necessarily hindering children’s education, and in some instances, is even facilitating school attendance. For example, in a recent study undertaken in Sierra Leonean small-scale diamond mining camps (NMFJD, 2006), nearly 50 per cent of the 267 child labourers interviewed reported that they were attending school, using proceeds from their jobs to pay for their tuition fees. Their work, it was explained, takes place on a part-time basis — at the end of school days, on weekends and during school vacations. A similar pattern exists in the small-scale gold mining communities of Talensi-Nabdam District. Findings from recent research suggest that whilst endemic poverty is indeed fuelling child labour in the district’s ASM sites, its impoverished educational facilities have not diminished children’s ambitions to attend school. Despite an acute shortage of jobs in Talensi-Nabdam and surrounding townships, parents continue to value their children’s education.

THE DYNAMICS OF SMALL-SCALE GOLD MINING IN NORTHERN GHANA

Although Ghana has ratified a number of international treaties on child labour, the approaches being taken by its policy makers to tackle it are grounds for concern. Its US$ 4.75 million ILO-IPEC Ghana Timebound Programme and numerous complementary initiatives since undertaken by the government are all premised upon the idea that child labour is harmful and discourages enrolment in school, despite recent findings, including those collected by the ILO itself, which suggest otherwise. The ‘Ghana Child Labour Survey’ (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003), for example, identified 2.47 million economically active children, most (64.3 per cent) of whom were attending school at the time. Perhaps more revealing, in the initial study undertaken in ‘Cocoa Districts’ as part of the National Programme for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour in the Cocoa Sector (NPECLC), the centrepiece of Ghana’s ILO-IPEC Project, it was found that

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5. This exercise began in 1992, when the Ghana Statistical Service carried out its ‘Methodological Sample Survey on Child Labour’ following the implementation of the 10-year National Programme of Action, ‘The Child Cannot Wait’, which at the time served as a policy framework for organizations working with children in the country (Mahama, 2002). Following ratification of ILO Convention 182 on The Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, and after passing several fairly comprehensive pieces of legislation, the Ghanaian Government commissioned the ‘Ghana Child Labour Survey’, a nationwide survey of 10,000 households (60.3 per cent based in rural areas), conducted in January–February 2001.

6. Under this four-year programme, launched in 2004, targets for the elimination of the ‘worst forms of child labour’ were established, and educational services were developed to facilitate the removal of 4,700 children and prevent 5,300 others from engaging in exploitative labour. Under NPECLC, two studies on child labour have been carried out, district and community-level Child Protection Committees have been established and charged with developing child labour plans and monitoring children, and Child Labour Desks have been set up at COCOBOD (The Ghana Cocoa Board) headquarters.
91 per cent of children surveyed were enrolled in school, a higher figure than the national average of 88.1 per cent (NPECLC, 2007). School enrolment in rural Ghana is indeed increasing because of the Capitation Grant, which abolished fees at public primary schools. Children are now entitled to nine years of free basic education.

Moreover, several of the cases which the ILO and the Ghanaian Government describe as ‘child labour’ on cocoa farms appear to be more representative examples of children ‘going to farm’. These conclusions stem from a misdiagnosis of the role smallholder agriculture plays in Ghana altogether. Specifically, surveys carried out by the Ghana Statistical Service suggest that agriculture employs close to 70 per cent of the country’s rural population, a figure that is highly misleading: 80 per cent of national agricultural production originates from smallholder farms of less than two hectares in size, which are ‘linked largely to household subsistence’ (Aryeetey and Nyanteng, 2006: 7), not export markets. Continued belief that agriculture is Ghana’s economic mainstay, in turn, makes accurate analysis of child labour in its rural areas virtually impossible. Although close to 75 per cent of children in the country’s rural areas are engaged in agricultural work of some kind, most of this labour are likely to be cases of ‘children going to farm’ on family plots (Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1997; Mull and Kirkhorn, 2005). In many instances, tens of thousands of these children’s families have ‘branched out’ into more lucrative non-farm activities in order to earn disposable incomes (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010), which could explain the high incidence of child labour in many of the country’s ASM communities: the same ‘farm hands’ may very well have become ‘mine hands’. It could, therefore, simply be a case of an expanded ASM workforce — projected to have increased from 30,000 to one million over the past two decades in Ghana (Banchirigah, 2008; World Bank, 1995) — making ‘child labour’ a more ‘visible’ phenomenon in the country.

A small information base and inconclusive evidence about the drivers and implications of child labour in rural Ghana makes in-depth, location-specific case study analysis imperative. Aside from the general assumptions made by officials at the ILO and allied organizations, few attempts have been made to determine why child labour is so widespread in most ASM camps across Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole; even fewer attempts have been made to determine how schooling and poverty influence children’s decisions to pursue employment in the sector. The discussion that follows helps to bridge these gaps by examining the growing child labour ‘problem’ in Talensi-Nabdam’s ASM camps.

7. The Capitation Grant, implemented in 2004–2005 with the support of the World Bank, effectively abolished public school fees at the kindergarten, primary and JSS levels: the scheme provides each child with a grant of c 30,000 (US$ 2.50), which is awarded to public schools to cover fees.
Established in 2004, following the partitioning of Bolgatanga Municipal District, Talensi-Nabdam is one of eight districts in the Upper East Region of Ghana. It contains vast, booming small-scale gold mining territory, covering 912 km²; is home to 94,650 men, women and children, 90 per cent of whom reside in rural areas, dispersed across 185 communities; and is situated in the arid northeast, the most inhospitable area, climatically, of the country (Government of Ghana, 2007a; Ljunggren, 2007). The district’s small-scale gold mining is a relatively recent phenomenon and has not received anywhere near the coverage given to the communities in the south of the country. Activity began in the mid-1930s but stopped during the Second World War. It was not until the mid-1990s that it resumed, following the rediscovery of gold in the Nangodi community. Activities spread rapidly to surrounding communities, including Pelungu, Duusi, Yakote, Gbane and Tule: today, four of the district’s six Area Councils have a significant ASM presence. The ‘Upper East Region Housing and Population Census’ (Ghana Statistical Service, 2005: 9) has helped bring this to the attention of policy makers, reporting that ‘lately...[ASM] has become rampant in the area of Tongo, Sheaga, Duusi, Pelengu and other small villages’.

The current gold boom in Talensi-Nabdam has, in large part, been made possible by the Minerals Commission, the main promotional and regulatory body for the mining sector in the country. In 2004, it set aside a 72 km² plot of land in an area called Yale (or ‘Yele’) for prospective licensed small-scale gold miners to register their operations. In addition to hundreds of galamsey groups, there are currently five registered concessions in the area, based in and around Tongo, the district capital: ‘Accra’, run by the Accra Small-Scale Mining Group; ‘Tarkwa’, run by the Nontaaba Mining Group; ‘Kejetia’, operated by Unique Mining Group; ‘Obuasi’, operated by the Obuasi Small-Scale Mining Group; and Banteman, run by the ‘Yenyeya’ Small-Scale Mining Group. The paperwork for another concession, ‘World Bank’ (Porbotaaba Mining Group), was, at the time of writing, being processed by the Minerals Commission. Licences have enabled these groups

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8. A local label given to illegal small-scale miners, the literal translation of which is ‘gather them and sell’.

9. In order to mine gold legally on a small scale in Talensi-Nabdam and anywhere else in Ghana, specific documentation must first be obtained. Like their large-scale counterparts, prospective concessionaires must follow a streamlined process in order to secure a small-scale gold mining licence, which entitles them to work legally on a demarcated plot of land of up to 25 acres approved by the government. Most of the country’s ASM operators, however, have ignored these laws, and continue to work illegally in localities such as Prestea and Japa in the Western Region, Dunkwa in the Central Region, and Noyem and Ntronang in the Eastern Region. In addition to complaints about the licensing process being exceedingly bureaucratic, costly and not necessarily guaranteeing an applicant access to productive areas (Hilson and Potter, 2005), it appears, given the frequent encroachment of operators on to plots demarcated to foreign mining and mineral exploration companies, that there is very little viable land available for small-scale mine titling; an estimated 12.5 per cent of the country’s land is currently under concession to large-scale mineral exploration
to access formal support, including, most recently, a government-backed loan,\textsuperscript{10} which has facilitated marked increases in gold production in the district.

The flourishing small-scale gold mining activity in Talensi-Nabdam has become the economic cornerstone of the Upper East Region. At present, over 10,000 men, women and children are employed directly by the district’s small-scale gold mines, but the number continues to increase ‘because people are getting ore’ and the price of gold is at a record high.\textsuperscript{11} In addition to employing numerous locals, the mines have attracted a host of southerners, who have added to the complexities of the sector’s labour dynamics: operations feature hundreds of people working an array of different skilled and semi-skilled jobs — as ‘chiselers’, drivers, machine repairmen, blastmen, drillers, shaft ‘timberers’ and drillers. Migratory southerners, with their considerable mining experience, mainly occupy skilled positions; according to records maintained by the Minerals Commission district office in Bolgatanga, there are, at present, 1,285 such permanent employees in Yale.\textsuperscript{12} Thousands more (primarily locals) work as temporary labourers, either as ‘loco boys’\textsuperscript{13} earning a fixed wage for carrying sacks of ore and gravel, or as diggers who have ore-sharing arrangements in place with the respective concession holder. Awumbila and Tsikata (2007) misleadingly suggest that the district’s gold mines are controlled by southerners, reporting that nearly three quarters of the district’s mining households ‘belong to a household elsewhere’. But this is not the case:\textsuperscript{14} presently, all concession holders in Talensi-Nabdam are northerners, as well as most mine employees.

and mining companies (Ghana Chamber of Mines, 2006). But unlike other areas of the country, in Talensi-Nabdam, the government is encouraging the growth of licensed small-scale gold mining, in large part because there is minimal threat of a large-scale mine presence: the sporadic and/or near-surface gold deposits dispersed throughout Northern Ghana are of less interest to international mining houses.

10. In December 2007, the government dispensed a loan in the form of equipment to the mining groups working in Talensi-Nabdam. The groups have been provided 2.2 billion cedis (US$\ \underline{220,000}) in equipment, including water pumps, generators, compressors and crushers, on the condition that they sell their gold to government agents and make timely repayments for the equipment.

11. Interview with government official (Bolgatanga, 7 May 2008).

12. Details on the numbers of permanent staff employed by each concession holder are as follows: Unique Mining Group, 500; Nontaaba Mining Group, 400; Pobortaaba Mining Group, 10; Yenyeya Mining Group, 325; Obuasi Mining Group, 50; and Accra Mining Group, 100.

13. A local name assigned to the individuals at mine sites who haul bags of ore for a fee, the \textit{loco} being a metaphorical reference to a transporting locomotive.

14. One of the most widely-spoken languages in Talensi-Nabdam’s mining communities is \textit{Asante Twi}, which is understood and spoken by \textit{Akans} in the south of the country. There is no single explanation for why \textit{Twi} is widely spoken here, although it is likely a result of it being the language of commerce in the country, the growing presence of southerners within the community’s mining camps themselves, and the links many locals have through trade, school and work in the likes of Accra and Kumasi.
Table 2. Gold Production in Ghana’s Small-scale Gold Mining Sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Small-Scale Gold Production (oz)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,457,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,381,345</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,236,833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2,274,627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2,031,971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2,138,944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2,342,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2,628,290</td>
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Source: Minerals Commission

As is the case throughout the country, small-scale gold mining activity in Talensi-Nabdam has mushroomed over the past decade, the demarcation of Yale and subsequent support provided to its licencees stimulating increased gold production, and contributing significantly to national output (see Table 2). But its growing socio-economic importance notwithstanding, the district’s small-scale gold mining camps are also associated with numerous social complications, a long list that includes child labour. The case being made by the ILO, policy makers and NGOs is that the abject poverty in the district, combined with the prospect of discovering favourable gold-bearing terrain, are drawing boys and girls of all ages to mining operations, where they engage in a range of activities. These parties also maintain that children’s participation in mining in Talensi-Nabdam is impairing their learning. Local government officers share similar views: ‘The engaging of children in galamsey and quarrying deprives them of the opportunity to attend school and unduly exposes them to health hazards. Among others the engagement of children in galamsey and quarrying exposes them to: low number of children of school going age at school . . . low enrolment and retention rates . . . high school dropouts rates . . . [and] poor performance in school’.

Preliminary analysis undertaken in the district convinced officials at the ILO to launch Operation Sunlight, an initiative that would become Ghana’s response to commitments made at ‘A Load Too Heavy’, the World Day Against Child Labour 2005. The project, which was carried out by the Bolgatanga-based NGO Afrikids, was premised upon the following: 1) that the rampant poverty plaguing the Upper East Region is fuelling child labour in ASM camps in localities such as Talensi-Nabdam; and 2) that increased educational support for children could go a long way toward reducing child labour. Its principal aim was to withdraw and rehabilitate 150 children.

15. Extracted from the ‘Application for Selection to Participate in Child Labour Monitoring System and Associated Activities’, produced by the Talensi-Nabdam District Assembly. This led to publication of the ‘Census of Children in and at Risk of the Worst forms of Child Labour in Communities in the Talensi-Nabdam District’ (Government of Ghana, 2007b).
from mine work in the locality, and to support the parents/guardians of these children (Afrikids, 2007). A study carried out in 2006 identified the 150 ‘most-needy children’ from families ‘firmly established’ in Talensi-Nabdam:¹⁶ thirty were put into vocational training programmes and the remaining 120 placed into sixteen different schools in the district as well as the adjacent Bolgatanga Municipality.

The analysis that follows explores further the links between child labour in ASM, poverty and education in Talensi-Nabdam District. The discussion draws upon feedback from interviews conducted with key informants in the district over a two-year period (July–August 2006, January 2007, April 2007, July–August 2007, November 2007 and April–May 2008), and uses the Afrikids experience throughout to contextualize further some of the ideas raised earlier in the paper.

CHILD LABOUR IN TALENSI-NABDAM’S SMALL-SCALE GOLD MINING COMMUNITIES: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE GRASSROOTS

During the initial phase of the research, the District Education Officer (based at the Ghana Education Services office), District Planning Officer and Labour Officer were interviewed, along with Afrikids project officers.¹⁷ The aim was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of the government and the ILO (through the NGO) on the child labour phenomenon in Talensi-Nabdam’s ASM communities. Interviewees were asked to provide their expert opinion on how the issue was being/should be addressed; whether child labour at the mines was linked to poverty; and whether mine work was impairing children’s learning. During the second phase of the research, three separate focus groups were conducted with the parents — mostly women — of Afrikids-‘sponsored’ children attending the Bonsa (‘World Bank’), Fountain Gate Preparatory (‘Tarkwa’) and Elim Full Gospel (‘Obuasi’) schools, which, collectively, absorbed 64 of the 120 children targeted under Operation Sunlight;¹⁸ each focus group contained twelve people (one parent per sponsored child) and took place in school classrooms during lunch breaks. Feedback on similar issues was sought: why their children are working; their opinion on the importance of an education in Talensi-Nabdam; and views

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¹⁶. A study was conducted by the District Assembly staff based in Tongo in 2006, the findings from which were used as the basis of a proposal given to the ILO. The 150 ‘most vulnerable’ children were identified using the data collected.

¹⁷. All interviews were conducted in English and focus groups were mainly conducted in Asante Twi. Unlike the south, where Akan languages are widespread, Northern Ghana is linguistically fractionalized. Whilst not a native language of the district, all of the participants speak Twi fluently, largely because of their past involvement in trade and frequent travels to the south.

¹⁸. Afrikids staff placed nineteen students in Bonsa, another nineteen in Fountain Gate, and twenty-six in Elim Full Gospel.
on how the government, the ILO and its partner, Afrikids, have approached the issue of child labour in the community’s mining camps.

Following completion of the focus groups, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine Afrikids-sponsored students (three from each school) aged eleven to fifteen (four girls and five boys). Each was asked a series of open-ended questions, including why they decided to pursue work at gold mining camps, whether or not they still work, and if Operation Sunlight is discouraging children from engaging in mine-related work. The headteachers of the three schools were also interviewed separately, each providing their perspective on the drivers of child labour in the district’s mining camps and the appropriateness of the Afrikids agenda. A final round of interviews was conducted with the five concession holders in Yale in order to hear their views on why child labour is rampant at sites, as well as their responses to accusations made by the ILO and NGO officers that they are encouraging young boys and girls to work.

The objective was to survey the opinions of a range of local actors in order to improve understanding of what is fuelling child labour in the district’s ASM communities, to determine whether children’s work at mines is impairing their education, and to gain insight on how the issue can be resolved. In reporting these findings, this section of the article revisits the key issues raised in the previous sections about child labour in African ASM camps: 1) whether, in rural areas, poverty is leading young boys and girls to work; 2) if, on the other hand, what is unfolding is less about exploitation and more in line with ‘children going to farm’; and 3) whether child labour impairs education, and if schooling is indeed an effective antidote.

‘Family Work’ and Poverty

No single theory sufficiently explains why there has been a rapid upsurge of child labour in Talensi-Nabdam’s small-scale gold mining camps. In fact, it is likely to be due to a combination of factors.

The evidence suggests that the growing presence of children in Talensi-Nabdam’s small-scale gold mining communities is indeed linked to a pattern of wider livelihood diversification that appears to be unfolding in the Upper East Region. The most recent data indicate that 70 per cent of the district’s people, or approximately 12,000 households, are engaged in agricultural activity (Government of Ghana, 2007a). The majority, however, cultivate an area of less than 1.6 ha (Ljunggren, 2007), which is well below the national average of 4 ha (Government of Ghana, 2007a). Moreover, the extreme environment limits farm production: rocky highlands, torrential rains and few natural erosional buffering systems, an abnormally long dry season (May to September), the inability to use bullock ploughs because of widespread ungraded and stony landscapes, and rampant aridity, confine the agricultural
economy of Talensi-Nabdam and surrounding areas to the subsistence production of a small collection of crops such as groundnuts and millet. An overdependence, economically, on a deteriorated farming sector was why, at the time censuses were being carried out for the 1998/1999 Ghana Living Standards Survey, 97 per cent of the population of the Upper East Region was living below the poverty line (Canagarajah and Portner, 2003; Whitehead, 2002). The recent discovery of gold and the subsequent expansion of mining activity, however, have changed the dynamics of the district completely. As Awumbila and Tsikata (2007: 6) point out, the industry has been ‘the major pull factor in attracting people back to the area thus reducing migration flows especially of the youth out of the area in the 1990s’; and, as explained, it has also attracted a host of farm families that have long struggled to subsist on the earnings from their crops. Overall, the emergence of small-scale gold mining has ‘led to a re-structuring of livelihoods, around gold mining which were [sic] hitherto marginal to livelihoods thus increasing its importance in the local economy’ (ibid.).

Earlier in the decade, the Upper East Region was identified as the location of the highest concentration of child labour in Ghana — an area where over 53.5 per cent of children were engaged in economic activities. But with the majority of its people heavily rooted in subsistence agriculture at the time, a large percentage of this work was probably children ‘going to farm’. Many of the children interviewed reported having accompanied their parents to the mines, where they continue to live together as families. Most were observed carrying out menial work alongside adults at sites, and others interviewed reported having engaged in similar work. This has attracted significant criticism from officers at Afrikids, who blame the parents for encouraging child labour. Despite acknowledging in an interview that ‘[Talensi-Nabdam’s] children go into mining because of the inability of their families to cater for them’, an Operation Sunlight project officer argued that high concentrations of child labour persist because ‘parents are illiterate . . . so the major concern [of the organization] is to sensitize the families’. The same project officer also condemned Yale’s concession holders, explaining that ‘mine owners see children as cheap labour’.

The view here is that the situation in Talensi-Nabdam’s mining camps supports the poverty–child labour thesis: that family hardship is indeed driving children to pursue work in the district’s mining camps. In villages such as Nangodi, a site not included in this study but which is the location of another ASM community containing Afrikids-sponsored students (seventeen in total), children are the ‘breadwinners’ of their families. Nangodi is a highly impoverished community that is infested with blackflies. The parents of several of the sponsored students have been blinded by blackfly bites and thus depend on their children for income; they crush rocks, and process and sell gold in order to purchase tomatoes and peppers for cooking. Whilst perhaps an extreme case, Nangodi does nevertheless illustrate the reality that many children now engaged in ASM in Talensi-Nabdam make important
economic contributions to their families. Individual accounts provided by the children interviewed during this research, though wide ranging, also underscore this: ‘James’, a thirteen-year old at Bonsa, who reported ‘mining for myself and my stomach’, claimed he earns 1 GH¢ 20,000–25,00019 per day ‘in shanking’; ‘Charles’, who is also thirteen and enrolled at Fountain Gate, noted that he ‘earns 1 GH¢ 35,000 for five days work — plenty of money [here]’; and ‘Messi’, a fourteen-year old boy also at Bonsa, who reported earning 1 GH¢ 100,000–200,000 ‘for two weeks work’, all of which he gives to his parents.

These children are not being forced by their parents to work as has been portrayed. They are rather doing so to pay for school — significant shares of these monies were being used to pay for school fees, as in the case of ‘Charles’; to replenish parents’ savings used for tuition payments, as in the case of ‘Messi’; and/or to provide financial support in order to attend school, as in the case of ‘James’. Under the project, the idea, initially, was to place children like these in public schools, which because of the Capitation Grant, no longer charge fees for the first nine years of schooling. But it quickly became apparent that there were few public schools within commutable distances from the mines; whilst 123 of the district’s 134 schools receive funding from the Capitation Grant, none of the facilities in the mining communities receive such support. With payment for private school fees not having been factored into Afrikids’ 2006–07 initial budget, officers elected to place children in private schools in the mining communities; teachers and heads of schools were promised rapid payment of fees.

The task of mobilizing these funds, however, proved difficult, and with no realistic means of doing so, the economic burden was transferred to private schools and subsequently, sponsored children’s parents. This caused significant agitation in target communities; in many cases, children were forced to work for longer periods at the mines. As one mother explained during a focus group at Bonsa, ‘even though [Afrikids] told them [the children] to stop, we wish for students to go to mine sites so they can fetch small monies for their fees’.

Moreover, Yale’s concession holders do not appear to be exploiting children as Afrikids’ officers have suggested. In fact, many expressed apprehension over employing children for fear of being prosecuted by police. But others, sympathizing with parents’ struggles, allow children to work. During the school break on the first Monday of April 2008, for example, the ‘Tarkwa’ site was teeming with children carrying out a range of activities, including ore washing and transport. One of the concession owners, ‘Daniel’, explained that despite the mandate of the ILO and the Ghanaian Government, he permits children to work on his site during their school break:

19. In 2007, the cedi was devalued. At the time of writing, 1 Ghana cedi (¢1) was approximately US$ 1 or 10,000 of the old Ghana cedis. All cedi values quoted in this paper, however, are in the old currency.
It is my work that is alleviating poverty in this district. I allow these children to come here during their vacations to collect ore and crush and sell. Because I cannot give them money, I allow them to come, mine, and sell the stones, and they get between € 800,000 and one million cedis to pay for their school fees to go to school. (‘Daniel’, concession owner, Tarkwa site)

To summarize, many children have accompanied their parents to the district’s gold mines where they have subsequently secured employment to help alleviate personal and family hardships. The consensus among the parents consulted was that the child labour at the mines was making schooling possible.

**Child Labour, Artisanal Mining and Education**

Any decision to reintegrate child miners into a school system presupposes that this is something that parents want. Discussions hitherto on children’s school attendance in impoverished sections of the developing world have focused on the issue of opportunity cost or the ‘family-economy argument’ (see, for example, Buchmann, 2000). This postulates that ‘attending school reduces a child’s availability for work in and outside the home’, and if he or she ‘makes substantial contributions to family income, or plays an important role in supporting other working members, then the opportunity cost of attending school is likely to be high and this may curtail the attractiveness of the schooling option’ (Bedi, 2004: 5). Punch (2002: 126) raises this point in her ethnographic study of rural households in Tarija, Southern Bolivia, reporting that ‘a vital factor determining whether secondary education is considered as a viable option or not is adults’ and children’s perception of the benefits of education compared with other available opportunities’. Simply put, it is often argued, particularly in rural settings, that ‘from an investment perspective, the household compares the costs of schooling to the expected benefits from schooling’ (Burke and Beegle, 2004: 335).

The relationship between child labour and education, however, is nowhere near as straightforward as the literature often portrays. Notably, there is a view that in the developing world, the decision to push children into schooling is largely governed by the educational levels of their parents. For example, Fetuga et al. (2005: 6), based upon findings collected from a study conducted in Ogun State, Nigeria, concluded that ‘the prevalence of child labour increased with decreasing parental education and socio-economic class’. Khanam (2008: 77) drew similar conclusions in a study carried out in rural Bangladesh, arguing that ‘the results show that education of parents significantly increases the probability that a school-age child will specialize in study’. In the case of Ghana, Hashim (2007: 916) argues that school costs factor heavily in this decision, pointing out that although fees were abolished following implementation of the Capitation Grant, ‘schools usually demand
levies for a range of miscellaneous necessities, such as school equipment, extra teachers and so on, in addition to costs such as school uniforms’, which families must pay. In Talensi-Nabdam, Afrikids provided sponsored children with schoolbooks, uniforms, shoes, pencils and bags — contingent upon them abandoning work at the mines — but did little to cover school fees, which again must be paid because none of the district’s schools are covered by the Capitation Grant. Hashim (2007) draws particular attention to the ‘Ghana Child Labour Survey’ (Ghana Statistical Services, 2003), which found that the inability of parents to cover school expenses was the main reason why children in the Upper East Region do not go to school.

But findings from interviews and focus groups carried out in Talensi-Nabdam’s small-scale gold mining communities do not support these observations. Throughout the district, there is a high level of illiteracy among parents; yet, most still encourage their children to attend school. Whilst their resilience has undoubtedly been tested by Afrikids reneging on the payment of school fees for their children, it has not changed their views on education. As one parent of a student at Full Gospel explained, ‘we want our children to go to school and when we were told that the [fees would be paid], we did not try [to get monies for fees] but with this announcement . . . we are now rushing [to pay]’. Parents maintain a positive outlook on their children’s education despite the limited availability of tertiary educational programmes of study at the local Bolgatanga Polytechnic, and an ineffective National Youth Employment Programme (NYEP) that has so far failed to generate significant attractive income-earning opportunities for the youth. The prevailing view among participants in focus groups was that schooling was a ‘ladder out of farming’ — that with an education, children will be in a good position to further their schooling and secure skilled jobs in Accra and Kumasi, in the process alleviating family hardship.

It is often argued that the high prevalence of child labour in sub-Saharan Africa has a lot to do with a ‘bankrupt’ educational facility: congested classrooms, which deny young boys and girls entrance to schools; appalling

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20. Since the Nkrumah period, Ghana has been at the forefront of educational expansion in sub-Saharan Africa. It is one of few countries in the region likely to reach the ‘Education for All’ targets by 2015, and currently has a youth literacy rate of 70.7 per cent (Peil, 1995; Rolleston and Oketch, 2008; UNDP, 2007). Perhaps more than most African countries, Ghana’s citizens cherish education, with many parents making considerable sacrifices to send their children to school.

21. The National Youth Employment Programme was launched with the aim of creating 155,319 jobs and placements for Ghanaians aged eighteen to thirty-five. To facilitate this, the Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment (MMYE) headquarters in Accra has developed the following ten generic ‘training modules’: 1) Youth in Agri-Business; 2) Youth in Trades and Vocations (Non-Agriculture Services); 3) Youth in ICT; 4) Community Protection System; 5) Waste and Sanitation Management Corps; 6) Rural Education Teachers Assistants; 7) Auxiliary Health Care Workers Assistants; 8) Paid Internships and Industrial Attachments; 9) Vacation Jobs; and 10) Volunteer Services (Government of Ghana, 2006). Few, however, have proved popular with the youth, especially in Talensi-Nabdam.
sanitary conditions; and centres of learning located vast distances from villages (Bonnet, 1993). Hashim (2007: 917) argues that this applies in Ghana, maintaining that poor quality services discourage attendance. The author points out how ‘ramshackle’ schoolrooms, short supplies of furniture and school supplies, and the frequent absence of (underpaid) teachers ‘partly explain the low enrolment rates in the village . . . only 62 per cent of school-aged children were enrolled in 2000–1’. The author is of the opinion that in the particular town of Bawku East Village, Northeast Ghana, where research was carried out, ‘62 per cent enrolment is a relatively high figure’. Similar conditions exist in Talensi-Nabdam: most of the district’s schools are also in a ‘deplorable state’; have impoverished sanitation facilities; are relatively inaccessible by road; have classrooms located in mud structures and under trees; and have inadequate supplies of teaching and learning materials (Government of Ghana, 2006). But this has not discouraged parents from pushing their children to pursue an education. Most children interviewed were enrolled in Junior Secondary School (JSS) at the time and were studying in an environment far more precarious than that of Bawku East Village: constant noise from mining equipment; dust and mud; leaking roofs (particularly at Bonsa, where one parent pointed out in an interview that ‘this school needs to be maintained, to be re-cemented and it only has three classrooms . . . how can our children learn?’); inconsistent attendance from teachers, most of whom rarely make the 10 km commute from Bolgatanga; and few learning materials. The experience at Talensi-Nabdam reinforces Bonnet’s (1993: 377) point that ‘Parents in Africa, like parents all over the world, are concerned with two things when it comes to their children: to give them the best they can and to equip them as well as possible to face the future; in other words, to educate them’. It also raises questions about the conclusions drawn in some of the literature produced on the quality of schooling as a driver of child labour in rural sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars seem quick to judge the views of parents on education, and underestimate children’s resolve when it comes to working in poor educational environments. The case of Talensi-Nabdam shows that even where literacy levels are low and learning environments are questionable, parents still value education.

As noted above, several scholars have argued that in developing countries, a family’s decision to send a child to school is determined largely by the perceived economic gain from doing so: that children pursue education or work. In rural Ghana, however, in many cases, child labour and schooling go hand in hand, the former making the latter possible. Canagarajah and Coulombe (1997) pointed this out in the mid-1990s, reporting at the time that throughout the country, child labour was not independent from schooling decisions because the high costs of schooling increase the likelihood of children pursuing work. Today, this symbiosis is particularly prevalent in Ghana’s ‘cocoa belt’ in the country’s Western Region where 63 per cent of children are engaged in some kind of economic activity (compared to the national average of 57.5 per cent) but 70 per cent of these ‘working
hands’ attend school or are enrolled in a vocational training programme (Mull et al., 2005). A similar pattern persists in the gold mining camps of Talensi-Nabdam. The children and parents consulted commented on how earnings from mining have made schooling possible, and how threats from Afrikids to stop providing pencils, schoolbooks and uniforms should the children continue to mine, have caused problems.

The contentious issue, of course, and the reason why children have been so reluctant to abandon mining is school fees, which again, the NGO promised to cover under the project. Delayed payment has caused considerable hardship. Each of the sixty-four ‘sponsored’ students at Fountain Gate, Bonsa and Elim Full Gospel was informed by teachers that they were responsible for delayed fee payments for the 2007–08 academic year.22 Before breaking up at Easter, teachers informed students that if fees were not paid upon their return, they would no longer be able to attend classes.

The parents who participated in the focus group at Fountain Gate expressed serious dismay over Afrikids not following through with its promises. One mother called the NGO ‘irresponsible’:

The NGO said that some of our children were not attending school, and when they came, that they would take care of them that they would pay for their school fees. And when they came [back], they bought one bag for each [child], one school uniform, nine exercise books, three pens for each student and two goats. They have not paid fees in six months — that we told them weeks ago that they had to do this, after sacking them from a meeting [here]. And that they would come back and [fix it] . . . but have not come back yet.

Another child interviewed at Fountain Gate expressed similar disappointment, explaining that, ‘we stopped mining because the NGO said they would help us pay for school fees but they have not . . . [and now] we need to pay ₵ 30,000 per month for three months’. Similar views were expressed during a focus group with the parents of sponsored children at Bonsa:

They [the NGO] said that they would pay the students’ school fees but they didn’t pay . . . seven months from today . . . They came here last month and they said they would help them pay school fees and parents asked why they have not yet paid, and that brought confusion between the group. And they fought and the NGO [people] went home. (Male parent)

When it emerged that sponsored students had not paid their fees, the parents of other children decided to withhold their own payments. Failure to pay fees in a timely manner prevented teachers themselves from getting paid. In Bonsa Primary, in March 2008, teaching staff had not been paid in over five months, despite being informed by Afrikids staff that fee payments would be made by February. In April 2008, during a focus group discussion

22. At Bonsa, the fees (in 2007–08) were as follows: ₵ 180,000 per term for SS and JSS; ₵ 150,000 per term for Primary; ₵ 120,000 per term for nursery.
at Elim Full Gospel, teachers made similar claims, explaining that they have not been paid in over seven months.

Operation Sunlight is premised upon the idea that ‘children need protection from work that prevents education or is otherwise harmful’ (Bourdillon, 2006: 1215). Its conceivers and managers argue that children’s engagement in mine work in Talensi-Nabdam is impairing their education. The evidence in support of this is compelling: in 2006, of the 948 children who wrote entry exams for secondary school, only thirty-three passed, and overall, only 44 per cent of the 26,317 children enrolled in school in the district in 2006 passed their course (Government of Ghana, 2006). The government has gone on record to report that ‘the performance of school children at the basic level can be described as substandard’ (Government of Ghana, 2006: 27). Staff at Afrikids and the District Assembly (local government office) share the view: as one government officer put it, mine work causes children to ‘lose touch . . . [so] when you write your exam and fail, where to you go?’. These observations reinforce findings reported in other studies carried out elsewhere in Ghana (see, for example, Heady, 2003; Ray, 2003), which also note that work outside of the household has a significant impact on learning achievement. But at the same time, what cannot be overlooked in the case of Talensi-Nabdam is how mining activities are enabling children to attend school, providing a source of income for fees and that at present, the sector is one of few ‘ladders out of poverty’ for the district’s children.

If children are to be successfully reintegrated into the educational system in the district, they must be supported to a point where mining is no longer depended upon economically.

**Eradicating Child Labour in Talensi-Nabdam’s Small-Scale Gold Mining Communities**

Is schooling a key to reducing child labour in Talensi-Nabdam’s small-scale gold mining communities? As already explained, several authors champion education as the best ‘antidote’ to child labour. In Talensi-Nabdam, whilst both parents and children have positive views on education and are doing whatever possible to make schooling a reality, the approach being taken to achieve this is unsustainable, and is potentially impairing learning: children working long hours — even if outside of school hours — to earn sufficient income to pay fees, cover other school expenses and wherever possible, to support their parents. The Talensi-Nabdam case illustrates how multifaceted the child labour ‘problem’ is in rural sub-Saharan Africa.

The projects which the ILO has financed on child labour and ASM in sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade are premised upon making available effective education to target groups:
Quality education is a vital part of the solution. At the very least, schools must be available, accessible, and hold full-time sessions or at least occupy a large part of the day. Furthermore, they must be affordable and of acceptable quality and socio-economic relevance. It is crucial to follow up and provide additional support to children who have been withdrawn from work and put into formal schools. (Jennings, 1999)

The ILO calls for the implementation of comprehensive approaches, arguing that the child labour ‘problem’ can only be addressed if both significant ‘downstream’ and ‘upstream’ changes are made (ILO, 2006). The main ‘upstream’ changes being called for include: 1) updating laws and regulations; 2) implementing new policies; 3) implementing a co-ordinating committee; and 4) establishing industry codes of conduct. Following ‘A Load Too Heavy’ in Geneva, 2005, the ILO launched the programme, ‘Minors out of Mining’, which ‘aims to eliminate child labour in small-scale mining completely within ten years, starting with countries where the problem is most serious’ (ILO, 2006: 4). Ghana, which ratified ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182, has, along with Peru, committed to removing and reintegrating 250,000 child miners over a ten-year period. The launch of Operation Sunlight marked the beginning of this.

It has become abundantly clear, however, that the ILO, its partners, and the Ghanaian Government, have made far too many assumptions about the causes and implications of child labour when drafting policies, designing laws and implementing programmes. Bradshaw and Wallace (1996: 63) reflect on how damaging initiatives that are not grounded in the local context can be, arguing that ‘in African families . . . there is a feeling that the policies [on child labour] dictated by international institutions have not trickled down . . . [and that] something that looks good as a national policy can be devastating for a village’. Based on the evidence, this is the case in Talensi-Nabdam, where children are being ushered out of artisanal gold mining. As explained, it is assumed that parents are pushing their children to mine, in the process depriving them of an education; and that concession holders are targeting young boys and girls as a source of cheap labour.

Significantly, many of these so-called exploited children are engaged in what the ILO would consider ‘light work’: washing, selling water and transporting materials. According to Article 7 of ILO Convention No. 138, which again, the Ghanaian Government has ratified, work of this nature should be permitted, provided that it is truly ‘light work which is not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and not such as to prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by the competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received’. If these guidelines are adhered to, even children engaged in more arduous work in the district’s gold mining camps should be permitted to continue working, since it makes schooling possible. The conceivers and supporters of Operation Sunlight, however, have assumed, prematurely, that Talensi-Nabdam’s children are ‘fall[ing]
victim to the free-wheeling lifestyle common in mining camps . . . [and that] virtually none get a decent education’ (ILO, 2006: i).

They also appear to understand very little about the regulatory setup for ASM in Ghana. Despite championing the importance of having in place a ‘co-ordinating committee’ to deal with the issue of child labour in ASM, the ILO failed to solicit inputs from the Minerals Commission in the planning of Operation Sunlight. It was explained during interviews that Afrikids rather deals directly with the District Child Labour Committee, a consortium of stakeholders established, in accordance with the recommendations of the ILO, to provide inputs to such projects.

The series of ‘downstream changes’ recommended by the ILO include: 1) making available ‘effective and affordable schools’; 2) mining improvements (processing, extraction and marketing); 3) establishing a mining association; and 4) implementing monitoring systems (ILO, 2006). In Talensi-Nabdam, where a mining association is already in place and several independent ASM support projects have been implemented, emphasis has been placed on sensitizing families on child labour legislation and empowering family heads, particularly women. But whilst these goals may be appropriate, the project itself (Operation Sunlight) was implemented by an organization (Afrikids) that has little understanding of the issue and the dynamics of ASM activities in Talensi-Nabdam; and co-sponsored by the ILO, an organization whose officers have been heavily influenced by pictures of ‘children at work in ASM camps’ despite knowing very little about the dynamics of child labour in the sector.

The first question that needed to be answered before the launch of Operation Sunlight was: why are children engaged in mining activity? Findings from research indicate that the growing presence of children in Talensi-Nabdam’s small-scale gold mining camps is linked to the wider livelihood diversification pattern unfolding in the Upper East Region, and that their involvement in paid work at sites is a coping strategy that enables them to attend school. But in practice, things have been interpreted differently: that children are being exploited by their parents and concession owners, and that families push young boys and girls to mine.

Despite evidence that families are moving out of ranching and agricultural activities into non-farm activities such as small-scale mining, officers at Afrikids decided to implement a ‘goat scheme’ — providing the family of each ‘sponsored’ child with two female goats, presumably for livestock rearing. It was explained that each goat had been vaccinated by a certified veterinarian, presumably so that parents would have durable stock for breeding. The ‘goat scheme’, however, is one of a long list of ‘buy a goat programmes\textsuperscript{23} implemented in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years aimed at helping to alleviate donors’ concerns about where funds are being

\textsuperscript{23} See e.g. www.farmfriends.org.uk or www.thecorporategoat.com (accessed 9 December 2008).
channelled. Rather than dispensing monies directly, sceptical donors are increasingly being asked by a growing number of NGOs to purchase, for an impoverished family or community, a goat, a cow, hens or seeds (Corporate Goat, 2007). But such an approach assumes that livestock is something that target groups covet which, in the case of Talensi-Nabdam, is open to debate. Many of the parents consulted expressed confusion over the exact purpose of the ‘goat scheme’, explaining that whilst they were grateful, goats were not a priority for families. The fact that, in the words of one parent, ‘many goats have gone missing, fallen into pits and have died’ is testament to the low level of importance given by many residents to the scheme and livestock rearing on the whole.

The priority of the children and family members consulted is the payment of school fees. The ILO, however, will not pay school fees; nor will it cover ‘feeding allowances’ or meal costs, which, at one point in Talensi-Nabdam, had resulted in children receiving lunchtime meals of rice water and bread. In the end, Afrikids did manage to mobilize monies from a series of independent sponsors to cover fees for the 2007–08 school year, but not before seriously disrupting the dynamics of small-scale gold mining communities.

A second issue of concern is the lack of foresight displayed by the project’s conceivers and implementers, which serves as a warning to other organizations planning to undertake similar initiatives. As the analysis has shown, child labour is a complex issue which requires the application of equally dynamic solutions. The first mistake made by Afrikids was not having a contingency plan when it emerged that no public schools were within commutable distances from the mines. Officers found themselves scrambling for an alternative, eventually electing to permit ‘sponsored’ children to continue schooling in the private schools located in the mining communities. If, however, the organization is genuinely working towards removing children from mining camps, priority emphasis should be placed on removing individuals from their work environments, and integrating them into an atmosphere more conducive to learning. Each of the three schools visited is located in the epicentre of mining activity, where sounds of blasting, crushing and drilling frequently interrupt lessons and where, as one government officer explained in an interview, ‘they [the children] are reminded’.

Without full commitment from an international organization such as the ILO or private sector partners, as well as an improved understanding of the situation on the ground, child labour projects in ASM communities are destined, in the words of one school teacher, to hinge upon ‘too many hopes’. In the case of Talensi-Nabdam District, the successful removal of children from ASM camps will depend on the completion of several tasks beyond the project, including: the District Assembly constructing a public school, an initiative which, in the words of one NGO officer, ‘if [said] yes to, would be subjected to auditing from the Ghana Education Service and would relieve children of the burden of having to pay school fees’; the District Assembly deciding to launch credit schemes for the parents of sponsored children;
fee payments being made in a timely fashion and parents redirecting these saved monies toward family support; and the District Assembly or another organization continuing the project.

Whilst perhaps commendable, it would seem that the interests of target communities would be better served if international organizations such as the ILO and NGOs such as Afrikids conducted an appraisal of plans and proposed methodologies with a view to identifying the aims, objectives and expected outcomes of project work.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted the consequences of implementing ungrounded solutions to address a complex issue in development: child labour in ASM communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The prevailing view in policy-making circles is that parents are pushing their children to work at ASM sites to contribute to family income, and that mine leaders are exploiting young boys and girls, seeing them as sources of inexpensive labour. In Talensi-Nabdam District, Northern Ghana, however, this is not the case. Children are rather moving with their parents to mines from family farms, and subsequently engage in mine work in order to finance their education and escape poverty. Their parents, many of whom are illiterate, value schooling, and are therefore doing everything they can to ensure that their children receive an education, regardless of how precarious the learning environment may seem.

An analysis of child labour in Talensi-Nabdam, and recent attempts to eradicate it, raises several important issues for discussion and questions for further research. First, and as underscored in this study, the reintegration of child miners into an education system is challenging, even in environments where parents are highly supportive of the idea. To be successful, policy makers and officers at donor bodies and NGOs must come to grips with why children are mining in the first place. Reducing child labour in ASM will require identification of the precise economic functions being played by each child. Once this information is gathered, appropriate strategies can be pursued and developed to empower families. In the case of Talensi-Nabdam, the majority of children engaged in mine-related work appear interested in attending school; as has been explained, many continue to engage in arduous activity in order to pay for their school fees. The ILO, NGO and to some extent, the Ghanaian Government, have failed to identify these linkages.

Second, in order to successfully execute a project such as Operation Sunlight, a consortium of stakeholders must be involved: regulators, international organizations such as the ILO and the World Bank, private sector partners and NGOs. Whilst the management of the day-to-day activities can be entrusted to a local NGO, it is imperative that its work is monitored regularly. Without a supporting cast, relations between a grassroots NGO
and community can rapidly deteriorate and compound problems in target communities.

Finally, is the educational environment into which children are being placed appropriate for learning? In Talensi-Nabdam, where, at the time of writing, there were no public schools within a commutable distance, any programme of educational reintegration must take into account payments for transport or fees for private schools. It is also advisable that, unlike Operation Sunlight, programmes of reintegration target schools located outside of the areas where mining takes place, given that the aim is to sever children’s ties with the industry altogether. If the schools targeted for reintegration are situated in the heart of mining communities, as is the case in Talensi-Nabdam, children could be tempted to re-engage in work. The environment for learning in the district is not conducive to learning at present, and will continue to deteriorate until government bodies and other donors pledge support.

In poor communities such as Talensi-Nabdam, the importance of NGOs cannot be overstated: they provide poor people with a voice, and are seen as an important conduit to policy-making bodies. This dependency puts a considerable amount of pressure on an NGO, which is often entrusted to facilitate change. But when the dynamics of a phenomenon are not properly analysed beforehand, an organization with genuine intentions can rapidly become the subject of intense criticism. Failure to carry out just such an analysis in the case of Talensi-Nabdam has caused considerable confusion in target ASM communities, has potentially furthered poverty, and possibly fuelled the growth of child labour even further.

REFERENCES


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