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'We have so many challenges'

Small-scale mining, Covid-19 and constant interruptions in West Africa

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Fig. 1. Billboard of the anti-small-scale mining campaign. Ghana, 2019.

The current Covid-19 pandemic is generating a significant amount of attention among policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), research-funding agencies and academics regarding the impacts of this global crisis within the fields of health and well-being, social relations, the economy and politics. This also applies to the extractive industries, including artisanal and small-scale mining – our focus in this article – as reflected in a number of initiatives and events, such as the World Bank's Emergency Relief Response for Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining Communities Impacted by Covid-19¹ or the Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development's (IGF) annual meeting which focused on the question of how to move from the Covid-19 crisis to sustainability,² as well as in scholarly work.

Academics are scrutinizing the impact of Covid-19 on industrial mining (Bainton et al. 2020; Laing 2020) as well as artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). In the case of ASM, scholars have particularly pointed to Covid-19-related effects such as limited mobility, slow markets, low mineral prices and rising costs, and have considered how these might exacerbate vulnerabilities and inequalities (Calvimontes et al. 2020; Hilson et al. 2021; Thierens & Mawala 2020; see also the contributions to the Delve Covid-19 Impact Reporting initiative³), but have also illuminated miners' capacity to self-organize, adapt and find solutions to cope with this crisis (Calvimontes et al. 2020).

In addition, in highlighting the disruptive effects of Covid-19 on the ASM sector in West Africa during the early phase of the pandemic (February-May 2020), Hilson et al. (2021) situate these impacts primarily within structural predicaments, especially in terms of unsustainable economic growth models focused on large-scale resource extraction and a broader rural/agricultural crisis. The authors argue that while ASM offers crucial relief in this context and generates much-needed income and revenue, the current crisis puts this role under significant pressure, thereby making it all the more urgent to incorporate ASM in (development) policies.

In this article, we contribute to this important emerging agenda for research and policymaking by focusing on artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) in West Africa, and Ghana in particular. We argue that when addressing the impact of Covid-19 on ASM, it is critical to situate this current crisis in the broader context of serial interruptions – which we see as moments in which trajectories towards aspired improvements are disrupted – and structural inequalities that mark not only the ASGM sector, but also the lives of many people living in this region more broadly.

These interruptions and inequalities are multiple and come in a range of different guises. They appear in the economic, environmental and political domains and at both a societal and sectorial level (including those predicaments foregrounded in Hilson et al. 2021), as well as a social and personal level. As a result, people working in ASGM, like many others, typically live in situations that are chronically affected by such interruptions and are deeply precarious. Foregrounding this structural condition is key to understanding and contextualizing the current moment – which may be experienced by some people as 'just' another interruption – and must be taken into account in any research and policy emerging from it.

In order to pursue this argument, we briefly revisit scholarship on the chronicity of crisis, followed by an



outline of Ghana's ASGM sector and an account by a Ghanaian miner indicating key events and dynamics during the period January-November 2020. This account, substantiated by wider observations we made during the past decade(s) of field research in West Africa, allows us to situate (the impact of) Covid-19 in a more relational perspective, to avoid singling out the impact of Covid-19 as homogenous and, in the case of ASGM specifically, to develop responses that understand and target it as a structurally precarious sector – whether people are affected by Covid-19 or not.

Chronic crisis, constant interruptions

As several scholars have shown, the lives of many people around the world – especially in the Global South – are characterized by the occurrence of multiple crises, sometimes in rapid succession. Such a situation gives rise to what can be seen as a more or less constant condition of crisis. For example, drawing on ethnography from Guinea-Bissau, where decline and conflict have become 'the societal states from which people make sense of events' (Vigh 2008: 6), Vigh argues that instead of seeing crisis as a particular period 'in context' and a state of abnormality, we should approach crisis 'as context' (ibid.: 8) and a 'state of affairs' (ibid.: 10). This approach resonates with that of Mbembe and Roitman, whose depiction of crisis as 'lived experience' (1995: 325) suggests that crisis materializes in and becomes part of the conditions of people's everyday lives.

As a result, the crisis loses its exceptional character and becomes 'a "normal", ordinary and banal phenomenon' (ibid.). Of course, it must be stressed that although 'crisis might constitute the local, quantitative, normality it is not necessarily seen as positively or qualitatively so' (Vigh 2008: 11). Moreover, in addition to the idea of crisis as chronicity, to borrow Vigh's terminology, it is key to acknowledge, especially in the current context of Covid-19, that the various crises that mark people's lives have very different degrees of visibility to external or outside observers. After all, 'big' societal crises, such as economic collapse, environmental disasters, violent conflicts or health pandemics, tend to receive more widespread attention and hence be more visible than 'small', individual crises such as death, illness, accidents or one's dependence on unequal and perhaps exploitative social relationships. Yet these different scales and degrees of visibility to wider publics do not necessarily reflect their disruptive

Fig. 2. A row of ghettos where gangs work underground. Ghana, 2020.

Fig. 3. ASGM comes in many forms: River dredging is one of the most contested forms of ASGM. Ghana, 2019.

effects on those experiencing them, nor can they be seen to be independent. Cornwall's (2007) work on survival tactics among Yoruba women traders is exemplary in this regard as she shows that 'the kinds of uncertainties and the risks associated with trading leave women very vulnerable when personal crises disrupt their day-to-day struggles to make money' (ibid.: 40). In other words, crises of different scales, forms and magnitudes on personal, societal and sectorial levels are contingent.

We build upon these approaches to crisis by using the notion of interruptions. This notion, seen as those moments in which trajectories towards aspired improvements are disrupted, better allows us to foreground disruptive events of different scales and temporalities, as well as disturbances associated with moments of discovery, reward and relief. By applying this perspective, we foreground the series of big and small interruptions and the resulting precarity – seen as 'life without the promise of stability' (Tsing 2015: 2) – that mark the artisanal and small-scale (gold) mining sector in Ghana, and West Africa more broadly.

ASGM in Ghana: A turbulent sector

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining is generally understood as low-tech, labour-intensive gold mining and processing, although there is broad agreement among scholars and policymakers alike that this definition no longer covers the current state and diversity of ASGM globally, which is increasingly expanding in terms of capital, scale and technological advancement (see for example, Verbrugge & Geenen 2020). Illustratively, ASGM in Ghana (often referred to as 'galamsey', which is a corrupted form of 'gather and sell' and is used to point at its informal character) comprises different types of operations targeting both alluvial and hard rock deposits and ranging from river dredging and surface mining to reworking old industrial underground systems or opening new underground operations (see also Mantey et al. 2017).

Some of these operations use rudimentary tools only, but others make use of excavators, pontoons equipped with generators and suction devices, ventilation and water pumping equipment, explosives and water cannons. Moreover, while forms of wage labour do occur in ASGM, and increasingly so as a result of the upscaling of operations under the influence of Chinese technology and capital, a key feature of most operations is their informality and their organization as a world of debts (Panella 2010).

Largely driven by the hopes and possibilities of realizing substantial improvements in life, and as an alternative to subsistence agriculture (e.g. Fisher et al. 2009; Geenen 2018; Hilson et al. 2021), teams of artisanal and small-scale miners may work for long periods in the hope of striking gold-rich ore. During this time, so-called sponsors, who seek to assure the right to buy up the gold once it is found, will cover daily expenses and operational costs. Once gold (ore) is found, it will be divided between the team, the sponsor and – often – local landowners (and potentially others). These extensive debt relations testify to the miners' precarity, since the period of indebtedness is characterized by hard work with little reward, strong dependencies on (powerful) others and uncertainty of outcomes (will gold be found and will agreements be upheld?).

ASGM is not new to Ghana. On the contrary, the country's history of gold mining dates back to at least the 10th century. Yet while gold mining has always been a dynamic and constantly changing sector which has been through numerous periods of turbulence (see Pijpers 2020), the past few decades in particular, have been marked by processes of increased acceleration and contestation, not least in the small-scale mining sector. Developments such as the massive lay-offs by big mining companies in the 1990s



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(Akabzaa & Darimani 2001), the drastic increase in gold prices around 2010 and the insertion of Chinese actors, capital and technology starting around 2006 (Hilson et al. 2014) have propelled increasing numbers of people into artisanal and small-scale mining and dramatically increased its scale and speed of extraction.

Among other things, this resulted in a civil society campaign against ASM, particularly gold mining, in the beginning of 2017, and a moratorium on all ASM activity imposed by the Ghanaian government and enforced by a special military taskforce lasting from April 2017 to December 2018. While this political decision has been questioned (Hilson 2017; Nteuwusu 2018), it is not difficult to picture the dramatic effects on the estimated 1.1 million people directly engaged in ASM (Hilson & McQuilken 2014: 105) who have witnessed their prospects of revenue pathways evaporating.

In other words, the Ghanaian mining sector is shaped by a turbulent history featuring course-changing events of different scales and magnitudes and marked by a high degree of precarity and uncertainty (at both a sectorial and individual level). In order to make this more tangible and situate this in the actual lives of miners in the here and now of the global Covid-19 pandemic, we turn to the emblematic experiences of a small-scale gold miner.

Interruptions: An account from Northern Ghana

The account presented below was narrated by a male gold miner working informally in a small gold mining town in Northern Ghana. Currently, most operations in this area take place underground, worked by teams of approximately 10 (mostly young) men who are organized in so-called ghettos. Our narrator is one of the on-

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1. See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/07/29/egps-launches-new-emergency-relief-response-for-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining-communities-impacted-by-covid-19>.

2. See <https://www.igfmining.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020-IGF-AGM-Communique-EN.pdf>.

3. DELVE is an online data platform funded by the World Bank's Extractives Global Programmatic Support (EGPS) Multi-Donor Trust Fund. It is currently coordinating a data-gathering exercise to monitor and record specific Covid-19 impacts on artisanal and small-scale mining communities. See <https://delvedatabase.org>.

4. 'Good stones', or simply 'stones', is the term locally used to refer to gold-bearing ore.

5. Conflicts over landownership and hosting relations or the environmental and health hazards posed by dust, mercury or cyanide, for example, were also briefly mentioned by our interlocutor and observed during earlier field research in the area.

Akabzaa, T. & A. Darimani 2001. *Impact of mining sector investment in Ghana: A study of the Tarkwa mining region. A Draft Report Prepared for SAPRI.*

Bainton, N. et al. 2020. Invisibility and the extractive-pandemic nexus. *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7(3): 841-843.

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Fisher, E. et al. 2009. 'The ladder that sends us to wealth': Artisanal mining and poverty reduction in Tanzania. *Resources Policy* 34(1-2): 32-38.

Geenen, S. 2018. Underground dreams: Uncertainty, risk and anticipation in the gold production network. *Geoforum* 91: 30-38.

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site leaders of such a ghetto. The account is the result of WhatsApp conversations (group video calls and chats) held between September and November 2020. Crucially, these conversations are grounded in our earlier research on gold mining in the region (e.g. Luning & Pijpers 2017; Pijpers 2014) and our long-standing collaboration with different miners operating in this area, as well as elsewhere in Ghana (see Pijpers & Luning 2020). The trust relations that we have developed over the years have enabled us to continue doing research, at least to some extent, even under the extremely constraining conditions of the pandemic and the limitations of doing research online.

Our conversations with our interlocutor began by asking him to explain what happened after he heard about Covid-19 and to describe the main events that have influenced or affected operations since our last physical visit in January 2020 – at that time, a period spanning roughly nine months. Although the account is the result of a series of conversations, between which we exchanged photographs and short video clips on WhatsApp, for the sake of space and coherence we present the dynamics experienced in the form of a monologue:

When we heard about Covid, we had to stop working straight away. It was very serious, they scared us a lot. We are working in ghettos with a large group close to each other and they told us that we could easily make each other ill. So, we had to stop working in large groups and we would limit the group to 10.

But even before that, there were so many challenges. We have had accidents in the pits before Covid. Do you know the *pullar* [pumping] machine for taking out water? One day there was a problem with the machine when we had to bring it down [underground]. Three men were working there. They wanted to prepare for blasting, but there was water, so they needed to pump. And then they got shocked when the *pullar* boy [the one who operates the pumping machine] let the machine down. Two of them managed to pull themselves up, but one jumped down again in the water and it was really serious. He got shocked, electrocuted. We had to go down into the pit to take the dead person out. Then we called the police and we had to tell the family. And then we had to bury him.

Then there was another accident. This time it was the heat. Do you know 'heat'? When you come to a certain level you cannot breathe, you need ventilation. After the blasting you have to wait a long time before you can go down, til there is fresh air. But one day, someone went down and did not come up, not even after an hour. Someone else went down, and also did not come back. We waited a long time, but then we went down and saw that the two people had died. It is not easy. It was very sad – the wife of one of the deceased gave birth only a month after he had died. She was pregnant and he never got to see his child. It was very sad.

So already before Covid, we had all these challenges. We have so many challenges. You know when we take the waste out [of the pit]? This is very difficult and hard work. Then, when we do that, sometimes others [other miners] just throw it back; then you just have to take it out again. You know, the funny thing is, if you are not from there, things are not easy. Once you are blasting and you have arrived at the good stones,⁴ your problems begin. They [the local townspeople] say, 'Go away. This is not your place'. They do not beg [ask]; they simply use force. It is with the good stones that the troubles begin; then they come and want it.

There are so many challenges and it is difficult to work here as a stranger. It is better to start your own business, but I only thought of that after the experience with the good stones. I did not think I wanted to go out of mining before all this happened when the good stones came out. When we got the stones, all of a sudden people came from nowhere to take things from us. God has blessed this land; you can just walk about and find gold without big equipment or digging. But yet there are so many problems.

It [Covid-19] is not a problem anymore. We do not hear anything about it anymore. I also do not know people who have the illness.



Fig. 4. Underground operation in a former industrial tunnel in Tarkwa. Fig. 5. Reopening a former industrial underground system in Tarkwa, Ghana, 2018. Fig. 6. Upscaled washing. Ghana, 2016. Fig. 7. Old large-scale site, now hosting many small-scale operations. Ghana, 2019



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(From left to right, above to below)

Fig. 8. Woman working at a small processing site. Ghana, 2019.

Fig. 9. Adding acid to a gold-cyanide solution as part of small-scale cyanidation processes. Ghana, 2018.

Fig. 10. Mining in the rainy season. Burkina, 2018.

Fig. 11. Group of women dividing ore. Ghana, 2020.

Fig. 12. More money, more problems. Writing on a wall in a small mining town. Ghana, 2020.

Fig. 13. Cyanide basins used to extract gold through cyanidation processes. Ghana, 2018.

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- The rain has damaged one of the pits. It is very, very dangerous down there; you cannot go there. Have you seen it [refers to a video shared on WhatsApp earlier]? You can fetch water from there. You use a bucket and fetch water from there because of the rain. So when it is rainy season we always go on break, at least three to four months, before we come back again and start work again. That is how it is.
- We now work in Kibi Adukrom [another site within the same area] and you know, I have sacked all the people you saw last time. I have sacked them because 10 sacks [of ore] got lost – disappeared. And the funny thing is, when you need them [those workers], they are never there, but when you do not need them, they are always around.

Exemplary interruptions

Although far from being exhaustive,⁵ this account draws attention to the diverse levels and magnitudes of different interruptions that constantly disrupt the lives and operations of small-scale miners – an image that resonates with the ways other scholars have approached the chronicity and contingency of crisis (Cornwall 2007; Mbembe & Roitman 1995; Vigh 2008).

Moreover, although hardships and uncertainties are usually experienced in the period before gold is found, the above account indicates that rather than bringing reward and relief from hardship and ongoing debt relations, the event of finding gold attracts a level of attention which also instigates new kinds of disturbance and interruptions. In other words, interruptions can and do occur at any time, even during what are supposed to be the 'good' times.

Importantly, this account from Northern Ghana is not exceptional. On the contrary, while specific dynamics differ (due to the type and scale of operations, climatic conditions or the relative power of miners in larger fields of governance), we have recorded similar narratives across the country. Illustratively, our conversations with miners from Tarkwa (a major mining town in the south of Ghana), illuminated that although Covid-19 triggered a temporary drop in prices, a reduction in mobility and a brief closure of operations in the early phases of the pandemic (approximately between March and April 2020), these challenges were overcome relatively quickly and other interruptions were reported to be more prominent and disruptive. The on-site manager of a licensed, small-scale mining operation, for example, indicated that although they shut down for two weeks in April 2020, they had not experienced any other significant Covid-related interruptions.

Moreover, he insisted that the current situation could by no means be compared to the 21-month moratorium on ASM in 2017-2018 (see above). During that time, many operations and individuals lost a lot of money, but, he stressed: 'We are in a better form now'. In fact, over the past year, their operation has moved into production and has grown from approximately 30-40 workers in January 2020 to a workforce of 700 in early February 2021. This significant growth does not imply, however, that their operation did not face any challenges. Far from it. During the past year (deadly) accidents, equipment breakdown, political interventions, competition between rival mining operations and violent clashes between competing groups of miners (the latter two following the discovery of rich ore, as in the narrative above), caused serious interruptions to their operations and personal lives. Indeed, 'everything about *galamsey* [ASGM] is rough', our interlocutor tellingly assured us.

Our observations from Ghana regarding the serial character of interruptions of different scales and magnitudes also resonate with broader dynamics in West Africa. As transpired during Pijpers' earlier research on artisanal diamond mining in Sierra Leone in 2010, here too interruptions such as site collapse, extortion by state and customary

authorities, deceit by partners following diamond discoveries and the loss of investments frequently interrupt the operations of artisanal miners, while 'bigger' events such as the civil war (1991-2002), the global financial crisis of 2008 or the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak (see Maconachie & Hilson 2015) presented additional layers of deep disturbance that became incorporated into the sector's history of interruptions and chronic precarity.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, one of the Sahel countries, which in recent years has become a terrain of violence involving religious extremists, vigilante groups and criminal networks (Luning 2020), 'jihadism' poses an immediate threat to the gold mining sector (Ouédraogo 2020) and while the introduction of new technologies may have increased gold recovery rates and offered new income-generating opportunities, it has simultaneously marginalized female mining actors (Lanzano 2020). Such additional examples underscore the pertinence and prominence of interruptions and obstacles of various kinds in artisanal and small-scale miners' attempts to create pathways to revenue and, ultimately, prosperity.

Conclusion – Constant interruptions

The current Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically affected the social, physical, mental and economic well-being of many people across the world. Yet, while fully recognizing crucial observations made by colleagues earlier in the pandemic about its impacts on ASM (e.g. Calvimontes et al. 2020; Hilson et al. 2021; Thierens & Mawala 2020;), and notwithstanding that it feels counterintuitive at a time when our own lives are also severely constrained due to the pandemic, our conversations with miners in Ghana during the past few months highlight that, for them, Covid-19 materializes as 'just' another interruption to lives and operations that are marked by constant interruptions of various kinds.

These interruptions play out in different domains and on different scales, ranging from structural predicaments and global crises to personal dramas, daily operational problems or sectorial turbulence, and even emerge when gold is found and reward and relief anticipated. Therefore, the current moment of global crisis – in which our gaze is typically (and understandably) dominated by Covid-19 and focused on its disparate effects – calls for: (1) bringing these effects into conversation with other interruptions; and (2) foregrounding ASGM as a sector which constantly faces new and recurring interruptions and has long been deeply precarious.

This analysis of the small-scale gold mining sector in Ghana, and small-scale mining in West Africa more broadly, also offers some key reminders for understanding the impact of Covid-19 more generally. It pushes us to ask critically how global crises become articulated and assume meaning in different settings, considering that the lives and lifeworlds of many people in this world are marked by multiple interruptions, as scholars such as Cornwall (2007), Mbembe and Roitman (1995) and Vigh (2008) have also shown in different settings.

Notwithstanding the different affordances and effects of these various interruptions, taken together they constitute a fundamental condition of constant interruption and precarity in which new interruptions become articulated, experienced, interpreted and dealt with. As a result (and of course in combination with other aspects), global crises like the current Covid-19 pandemic materialize differently in different places and to different people. In some cases, they cause significant additional challenges; in others, they may completely dominate life and pose major new threats; whereas in yet others they might disappear relatively quickly into the background, if only because other challenges and interruptions require priority. ●